

Election to NI Assembly

1982 "Prior" Assembly election

1. The last election to a NI Assembly took place in October, 1982. It was based on the then twelve Westminster constituencies. The PR system, using the single transferrable vote, was used. Constituencies elected from four to ten Assembly members (depending presumably on population size.) In 1982, the SDLP won 59% of the nationalist vote, SF 32% and WP 8.5%.

Legislative basis for possible future Assembly election

2. 1983 legislation provides that subsequent NI Assembly elections should be based on the current seventeen constituency Westminster model. The legislation also stipulated that each constituency should return five members to any Assembly. It appears that this legislation still applies. In the 1987 election, constituencies ranged in size from about 59,000 to 71,000 (average about 64,000.) These fluctuations would probably not be sufficient to justify any change in the constituency size provisions.

3. So far, no Assembly elections have been held under the 1983 legislation. It is difficult therefore to reach even approximately valid conclusions as to what might be the outcome of the Nationalist vote at any such future Assembly election. In addition, the context of such a future election would obviously affect the voting intentions of the electorate.

Voting system for future Assembly election

4. Assuming the single transferable PR system, and five seater constituencies, the formula for calculating the votes required to win a seat is:

(total valid poll divided by (number of seats in the constituency + 1)) + 1.

To take a concrete example, assume the valid poll is 42,000. Then in five seater, Assembly style constituencies, the quota is calculated as follows: $(42,000 \text{ divided by } (5 + 1)) + 1 = 7,001$. Put another way, you need to poll approximately 16.7% of the first preference vote for each seat you win. However, there is always a multiplier effect for larger parties - they win more seats than their first preference vote in itself justifies. Traditionally, this factor has favoured the UUP.

1987 Westminster election as rough guide to future voting intentions.

5. The 1987 Westminster election provides a rough indicator of the possible outcome of the nationalist vote in a future Assembly style election. However, in addition to the drawbacks in using the 1987 results which have been already mentioned, the following considerations also arise:

-- it could be argued that the first past the post system effectively deterred parties from fielding candidates in constituencies they could not win. Thus, the first preference returns deflate the real support of some parties, particularly smaller ones. Against this view, parties clearly to an extent use Westminster elections as an opportunity to assess the current and potential future voting appeal of candidates. In addition, parties are obviously concerned to maintain the morale of their supporters by fielding a candidate.

--the UUP and DUP ran agreed candidates in the 1987 election. The underlying logic presumably was to maximise the Unionist vote: it must be assumed they are the best judges. However, the absence of inter-party competition on the Unionist side is yet another differentiating factor from any future Assembly election.

For the purpose of this exercise, it is simply assumed the pluses and minuses cancel each other out.

Transfers to nationalist parties

6. Marginal seats will obviously be crucially affected by transfers among candidates of the same or different parties, whether Unionist or Nationalist. In this regard, we do not appear to have generally valid figures for calculating SDLP/Sinn Fein transfers. Where it appears in anyway relevant, this analysis relies on a May, 1983 MRBI pre-election poll for estimating plausible (at best) transfer figures. (Clearly, the political context within which the poll was conducted must be taken into account.)

7. In that poll, individuals were asked what party they would definitely not vote for. In response, 38% of SDLP voters said they would not vote for Sinn Fein. Similarly, 35% of Sinn Fein supporters indicated they would not vote for the SDLP. A parallel question was what party, other than of first choice, would an individual consider voting for. Here, 6% of SDLP voters said they would consider voting for Sinn Fein; the corresponding Sinn Fein support level for the SDLP was 12%.

8. Given these figures, which indicate a considerable degree of antipathy between the supporters of the two parties, it seems safe to assume a transfer level of between 30% and 40% at the most. Workers Party voters transfers, on the basis of figures in the same poll, would transfer at about the same %. The evidence suggests that any transfers would be about 3 to 2 in favour of the SDLP. Finally, based on the same poll finding, between 30% and 40% of Alliance voters would appear to be willing to transfer to the SDLP.

9. Based on the above assumptions the following constituency by constituency pattern emerges using the 1987 first preference returns:

Antrim East: the only nationalist candidate (WP) polled about 3% of the first preference vote.

Antrim North: SDLP 12.5%; SF 6%; total: 18.5%. Given the above SF/SDLP transfer level, the SDLP cannot win a seat on nationalist votes alone. However, the SDLP might win a seat if the final Alliance candidate is eliminated before the SDLP.

Antrim South: SDLP 10%; SF 4.4%; total: 14.4%. An SDLP Assembly seat here appears unlikely.

East Belfast: the SF candidate polled less than 2%.

North Belfast: first preference totals were: SDLP: 14.9%; SF 13%; WP 7.9%; total: 35.8%. The SDLP should win a seat (with WP and Alliance transfers.) SF have a good chance of winning the fifth seat.

South Belfast: SDLP 13%; WP 4.7%; SF 3.1%; total: 20.8%. The SDLP have a good chance of winning the fifth seat.

West Belfast: SF 41.2%; SDLP 35.7%; WP 4.4%; total: 81.3%. The most likely outcome appears to be SF 2, SDLP 2. The fifth seat would be contested between the SDLP, SF and UUP.

East Derry: SDLP 19%; SF 11.2%; WP 1.9%. The SDLP comfortably wins one seat.

- North Down: no nationalist candidate contested the 1987 election.
- South Down: SDLP 47%; SF 4.2%; WP 1.2%; total: 52.4%.
The SDLP will clearly win two seats. On the 1987 turnout, the SDLP would be favoured to take the final seat (in competition with the UUP.)
- Fermanagh/
South Tyrone: SF 26.2%; SDLP 19%; WP 1.2%; total: 46.4%. SF and the SDLP will win one seat. SF have some chance of winning the fifth seat assuming a 30-40% level of transfers from the SDLP.
- Foyle: SDLP 48.8%; SF 17.9%; WP 2.1%; total: 68.8%. The SDLP will win two seats, Sinn Fein one. The SDLP will be in strong competition with the UUP/DUP for the fifth seat.
- Lagan Valley: SDLP 6.9%; SF 6.4%; WP 2.9%; total: 16.2%. There appears to be no nationalist seat in this constituency.
- Mid-Ulster: SDLP 26.2%; SF 24%; WP 2.2%; total: 52.4%. The SDLP and SF will each win one seat. The SDLP, assuming their first preference vote remains above SF's, have a good chance of winning a second seat (possibly without reaching a quota.)
- Newry and SDLP 48.1%; SF 11.8%; WP 1%; total:

Armagh: 60.9%. The SDLP will win two seats and should take a third (in front of the SF candidate.)

Strangford: the WP candidate won just under 4% of the vote.

Upper Bann: SDLP 20%; SF 7.3%; WP 4.7%; total: 32%. The SDLP will win one seat. While the nationalist close is to two quotas, a second seat is most unlikely.

Conclusion

11. On the basis of the above, the SDLP should win fourteen seats. They have reasonable/good chances of winning five more. SF should win five seats, with chances of three more. One of the three possible SF gains (West Belfast) might be at the expense of the SDLP.

30 April, 1991.