

Note on the Richard Sinnott paper

The paper produced by Richard Sinnott is a very good academic examination of the different type of election systems i.e. first past the post, majority single seats, PR-STV and the list system. He then goes on to look at their possible application to Northern Ireland. However, the paper has a serious weakness in that the author does not take into account the peculiar nature of voting and transfer patterns in the North. This causes him to underestimate, in particular, the distortionary effects of the PR-STV system which occurs in practice in Northern Ireland.

I would offer the following comments on the paper and some general points on a list system election.

PR-STV System

1. The author concentrates on the first preference vote of the parties in the PR-STV system. The distortionary effect of this system derives primarily from transfer patterns rather than from first preference votes themselves.
2. The biggest losers under the PR-STV are the Nationalist parties. There is an amazing level of "tribal solidarity" among Unionists. Transfer rates of over 90% between candidates are common, not just within the OUP but also between all shades of Unionism. The Nationalists on the other hand do not show the same level of transfer solidarity between SDLP, SF and Nationalist Independents. In places like South Belfast the transfer rate between Nationalists (particularly SDLP to Sinn Fein) is often well below 50%. Therefore, Nationalist parties can achieve a plurality of votes in some district council areas and still do not gain control. Examples of this in the last local government elections were Strabane, Cookstown and Fermanagh.
3. The thesis that the UUP do not gain a significant advantage over the DUP in PR-STV type elections does not bear up in reality. Alliance and to some extent the SDLP and Nationalist Independents are more likely to transfer to UUP than DUP and therefore the Official Unionists get an extra lift in terms of seats relative to the DUP in this type of election.
4. An illustration of how the PR-STV electoral system works against Nationalist representation and in favour of the Official Unionist party can be seen in the 1982 Assembly election results. In that election, where all the major parties took part, the overall Nationalist vote was approx. 30%. This resulted in 19 Nationalists elected (14 SDLP and 5 SF) to the 78 seat Assembly. With an almost identical share of the vote the Official Unionists secured 26 seats.

Assembly Elections 1982

Combined Nationalist		Official Unionist	
% vote	29.5	% vote	29.7
% seats	24.4	% seats	33.3

5. Sinnott in his examination fails to take into consideration that there are sizable numbers of Nationalist supporters in constituencies which would not return successful Nationalist candidates under a five seat PR-STV. In places such as Portaferry, the Short Strand, Barnmore, the Southern part of the Glens of Antrim, Bangor etc., Nationalist supporters would be voting in constituencies where there is no realistic chance of electing a Nationalist to a peace forum. SDLP and Sinn Fein voters would be left with the choice of voting for Alliance or abstaining. The only place where this could happen to Unionists is in the redrawn West Belfast seat. In the pre cease-fire era the SDLP had difficulty in getting candidates to stand in local elections in places like North Down, Larne and Carryduff. This had the effect of depressing their overall vote.

The presence of pockets of Nationalist voters in strongly Unionist seats is one of the reasons why the Nationalist vote is higher in the single constituency European Parliament Election than it is in the Westminster or local elections. The European Parliament can be viewed as a "lead indicator" when it comes to the size of the Nationalist vote. At any particular point in time, the Nationalists usually score up several %s higher in the EP elections than in any other form of election. The Nationalist vote in the Westminster and local elections then takes some years to catch up on the level of support in the EP election - hence the phrase used by some journalists that the EP election is a "lead indicator" of Nationalist support.

6. Sinnott could have mentioned the Australian modifications of the PR-STV vote which try to make it more proportional. The PR-STVs form of voting originated in Tasmania and is still used in some State elections and in the Australian Senate elections. The Australians do not allow the voter to "plump" for one party or candidate. All votes must have equal value and hence the voter has to indicate preferences right down to the last name on the ballot paper. If the elector fails to complete the paper then there is a published preordained list indicating how the remaining preferences will be determined. This is a system of default voting where the candidate receiving the first preference has the right to decide the remaining unfilled preferences.

The List System

- 7.. The list system is an unfamiliar electoral mechanism to the Northern Ireland electorate and parties. It will, therefore, have to be readily acceptable and accessible from the outset. Any list system should meet the following criteria

- Simplicity

- Proportionality

- Inclusiveness

- Transparency

8. There are a whole series of electoral models throughout the democratic World using list systems. However, many are complicated and have been built up over the years with various refinements added. The voters in countries such as Germany, Denmark etc are familiar with their own systems and many of their unique features were incorporated to cater for local needs. These models would be unsuitable for an electoral process to decide delegations to all-party talks in Northern Ireland as they generally fail the first test of simplicity. It is desirable that voters understand that their single vote for a party will be consolidated with other similar votes throughout Northern Ireland and that their vote is of equal value to all others regardless of what constituency they reside in.

9. Any list system will have to achieve results which are proportional to the strength of popular support for individual parties. The purpose of this electoral test is not to form a Government but to start all-party negotiations. Therefore, if SF got 10% of the vote they should also get 10% of negotiating mandates.

10. It is clearly desirable that the talks process such be as inclusive as possible and in particular that there should be a place at the talks for the Loyalist parties. In deciding the participants in such all-party talks there is a contradiction between inclusiveness (by nature a large number) and establishing an effective negotiating body (by its nature a smaller grouping). If one accepts the desirability of including the Loyalist parties then the electoral body must be on the larger size. If it were decided that a body of 90 were to be elected then it is almost certain that the Loyalist parties would succeed in reaching the electoral threshold - as they would need only 1.1% of the total vote. This would mean that a party or a group of parties in a single alliance, would have to achieve approx 9,000 votes.

In the 1994 European Election the total electorate was 1,150,304. Using this figure together with an assumed valid poll of 70%, it would mean that for a party to qualify for inclusion it would need only 8,857 votes. This level of support should not present the Loyalist parties with too much difficulty.

Number of Mandates	Votes needed to achieve one Mandate	
--------------------	-------------------------------------	--

90	8,857	1.1%
----	-------	------

50	16,104	2.0%
----	--------	------

25	32,208	4.0%
----	--------	------

The possibility of parties such as PUP and UDP forming alliances to maximise their electoral return should be permitted. This would allow parties to combine to enhance their ability to get over a qualifying mark. (It is worth noting that in the PR-STV type of election for 90 seats, a party would need approx 7,000 votes in a single constituency to get one member elected again assuming a 70% poll).

11. There would be a need for transparency in the election. Parties would be required to

publish a list beforehand indicating in ranking order the individuals whom they propose to nominate to any negotiating forum. Electors need to be aware of the individuals as well as the parties who will be taking part in the all-party talks. It would appear clear that the British Government and the Unionist parties, as well as Alliance, will push very strongly for some type of standing body which encompasses all those elected. In the circumstances, it seems desirable to publish lists of potential members of the body.

Summary of recommended list method

12. The elector should be presented with a single ballot paper listing the names of the parties which have been invited to the ground work talks.* The parties should be required to publish lists of their candidates (in ranking order) and the distribution of negotiating mandates should be decided on a simple proportional basis to the votes received.

Conclusion

I believe the above significantly strengthens the view that the most appropriate and the fairest electoral system in the North for all party talks is the list system.

The alternative PR-STV vote, in the peculiar circumstances of Northern Ireland, has serious problems in relation to proportionality for the purposes of this particular exercise.

The Loyalist parties will be excluded from the negotiations if the PR-STV system is used but will be included if the list system described above is used.

The use of a list system opens up the intriguing possibility (though unlikely) of the Unionists failing to secure an overall majority in a forum elected under this system. The overall Unionist vote in Northern Ireland (excluding Alliance and other cross-community groups and individuals) has been falling since the mid 70s. The overall Unionist vote is in the region (48-53%). New electors on the electoral register are increasingly drawn from the Nationalist community (the majority of new voters since 1994 are Catholic). In the circumstances, the Unionists are not automatically sure of a majority under the list system (though in reality they will probably secure it). They are, however, absolutely certain to have a secure majority under the PR-STV system.

* The question of any party or individual who is not taking part in the ground work talks, participating in the election would have to be examined, e.g. Robert McCartney, the Green Party, the Conservatives etc. Legally it may be difficult to see how any party or person with a proven electoral base could be prevented from standing.

Ray Bassett
Anglo-Irish Division
1 March 1996