Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service
Briefing Note

Dr. Robert Barry

2017 Assembly Election:

Transferred Votes

This briefing note provides information on how votes were transferred between parties at the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly Election. It supplements the recently published Research and Information Service briefing paper on the 2017 Election results (*NIAR 20-17 – "Election Report: Northern Ireland Assembly Election, 2 March 2017"*)[1].

Key Points

- Only 18 MLAs had a sufficient number of first preference votes to meet the quota and to be elected at the first count. The remaining 72 were elected at a later stage and required transferred votes.

- A total of 166,134 votes were transferred during the 2017 Election count. A large proportion of these transfers (25%) were treated collectively during the counting process and cannot be attributed to individual parties. The percentages quoted below are not therefore definitive and merely provide an indication of transfers between parties based on what we can identify from the Electoral Office data.

- Of the parties elected, the DUP received most transferred votes (26%), followed by the UUP (23%), SDLP (18%), Alliance (12%), Sinn Féin (10%), People Before Profit Alliance (3%), Green Party (3%) and TUV (2%).

- Most of the UUP's transfers came from other UUP candidates (23%), the DUP (14%), SDLP (10%) and Alliance (8%).

- Most of the DUP's transfers came from other DUP candidates (32%), UUP (23%) and Alliance (13%).

- Most of Sinn Féin's transfers came from the SDLP (41%), other Sinn Féin candidates (25%), Alliance (7%) and People Before Profit Alliance (6%).

- Most of the SDLP's transfers came from the UUP (24%), Sinn Féin (15%) and the Alliance Party (11%). Only 2% came from other SDLP candidates.

- Most of the Alliance Party's transfers came from the SDLP (20%), UUP (11%), other Alliance Party candidates (11%), and the Green Party (11%).

- Most of the Green Party's transfers came from the SDLP (20%), the Alliance Party (17%), Sinn Féin (8%) and independents (8%).

- Most of the TUV's transfers came from the DUP (32%).

- Most of the People Before Profit Alliance's transfers came from the SDLP (39%) and Sinn Féin (6%).

Introduction

Transferred votes are an extremely important part of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system.

The STV system works as follows:

i. Voters in each constituency vote for as many candidates as they wish in **order of preference.**

ii. Each voting paper is checked to see if it has been correctly filled in and any spoilt papers[2] are removed from the count to give a **total valid count**.

iii. A **quota** is calculated for each constituency using the formula[3]:

$$\text{Quota} = \left[\frac{\text{total number of valid votes cast in constituency (V)}}{\text{Number of seats (S) + 1}} \right] + 1$$

iv. Voting papers are sorted according to first preferences. Any candidate attaining or exceeding the quota is deemed to be elected.

v. **Surplus votes** from candidates who exceed the quota are transferred at a fractional value to the remaining candidates according to next available preference[4].

vi. Candidates with the least number of votes are excluded and their votes are also transferred according to next available preference.

vii. This process continues until all available seats have been filled.

---

[2] Spoilt ballots include those where the first preference candidate cannot clearly be determined e.g. where a voter has placed a number of "X's" against the list of candidates instead of using the numbers 1, 2, 3, etc. If an "X" has been placed against only one candidate, this will be taken as the first preference and the vote will be counted. Also, if a voter has left out a number (e.g. voting 1,2,3,5,6) their votes up to the missing number will be accepted and the remaining numbers will be ignored (votes 1,2 and 3 only are valid in this example).

[3] The formula is a rationalisation of the simple majority count, whereby one candidate needs just over half the votes to be elected in a single member constituency i.e. 100%/(1+1) +1 = just over 50%. The Droop quota (as it is sometimes referred to) generalises this to say that in a two-member constituency, two candidates need just over one-third of the votes each to be elected. This gives a proportional representation of two times one-third or two-thirds of the total vote. Three members are returned with one-quarter of the votes each, proportionally representing three-quarters of the voters, and so on. Therefore, in a six-member constituency, the candidates require just over 1/7 of the votes each and the PR is 6/7 (or 86%) of the voters (see http://www.voting.ukscientists.com/stvcount.html).

[4] All the most preferred candidate's voters have an equal right to decide how that candidate's surplus vote is transferred or re-distributed to second preferences, so *all* the elected candidate's transferable votes are transferred with a fractional transfer value (obtained by taking the surplus and dividing it by the total number of papers that were transferable - the result is calculated to two decimal places and the remainder ignored).

In the 2017 Assembly Election, only 18 MLAs had a sufficient number of first preference votes to meet the quota and to be elected at the first count. The remaining 72 were elected at a later stage and required transferred votes.

Party to Party Transfers

A total of 166,134 votes were transferred during the 2017 Election count.

The importance of transfers in the 2017 Election was highlighted in the following constituencies:

- **Belfast South** – where the Green Party took a seat with the help of SDLP transfers;
- **East Antrim** – where the UUP took a seat with the help of DUP transfers;
- **East Londonderry** – where the SDLP took a seat with the help of UUP transfers;
- **Fermanagh and South Tyrone** – where the UUP took a seat with the help of SDLP transfers;
- **Lagan Valley** – where the SDLP took a seat with the help of UUP transfers; and
- **Upper Bann** – where the SDLP took a seat with the help of UUP transfers.

Results in the remaining 12 constituencies went in favour of the five candidates with the highest number of first preference votes (i.e. transfers did not ultimately change the outcome in those constituencies).

Vote transfers from party to party are summarised in Tables 1 and 2 below. Some transfers from excluded candidates were treated collectively during the counting process. These are included in the column labelled 'Combination' in the tables as it was not possible to attribute them to individual parties.

For some excellent infographics and a breakdown of party to party transfers by constituency, see the 'Elections NI' project produced by the Open Data Institute at NICVA and the Open Government Network NI.[5]

---

[5] http://electionsni.org.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/index.html

Table 1. 2017 Assembly Election Transferred Votes by Party

To / From	Alliance	CISTA	Con	CCLA	DUP	Green	Ind	PBPA	PUP	SDLP	SF	Workers Party	TUV	UKIP	UUP	Combination	Totals	% of all Transfers
Alliance Party	2,352	0	98	91	1,054	2,287	467	555	174	4,065	1,036	0	126	151	2,365	5,793	20,614	12.4
Citizens Independent Social Thought Alliance	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	34	0	0	0	0	0	42	0.0
Conservatives	22	0	0	0	104	0	2	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	15	25	174	0.1
Cross-Community Labour Alternative	7	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	11	9	0	0	0	0	27	61	0.0
Democratic Unionist Party - D.U.P.	5,480	0	100	11	13,543	191	1,437	69	2,943	793	140	0	2,090	672	9,947	5,170	42,587	25.6
Green Party	797	0	201	181	227	0	360	0	0	933	353	0	38	0	67	1,418	4,575	2.8
Independent	918	0	198	0	172	155	632	0	180	0	66	0	533	0	1,016	326	4,196	2.5
People Before Profit Alliance	0	0	7	142	0	123	0	0	0	2,189	356	0	0	0	0	2,776	5,593	3.4
Progressive Unionist Party of Northern Ireland	15	0	3	0	0	199	5	71	0	7	14	0	184	0	0	123	622	0.4
SDLP (Social Democratic & Labour Party)	3,390	0	46	79	1,324	267	1,060	503	52	531	4,637	0	58	0	7,101	11,119	30,166	18.2
Sinn Féin	1,176	0	8	0	71	97	562	1,006	17	6,743	4,030	0	8	14	111	2,582	16,425	9.9
The Workers Party	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	10	0.0
Traditional Unionist Voice - TUV	117	0	46	7	1,031	43	43	0	93	159	160	0	0	0	0	1,490	3,189	1.9
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	22	0	0	280	0	0	74	376	0.2
Ulster Unionist Party	2,960	0	509	23	5,068	562	1,609	60	1,894	3,753	172	0	1,477	785	8,805	9,827	37,503	22.6
Totals	17,233	0	1,215	535	22,602	3,923	6,185	2,264	5,353	19,209	11,021	0	4,796	1,622	29,427	40,749	166,134	100

Table 2. 2017 Assembly Election - % Transferred Votes by Party																
To / From	**Alliance**	**CISTA**	**Con**	**CCLA**	**DUP**	**Green**	**Ind**	**PBPA**	**PUP**	**SDLP**	**SF**	**Workers Party**	**TUV**	**UKIP**	**UUP**	**Combination**	**Totals**
Alliance Party	11.4	0.0	0.5	0.4	5.1	11.1	2.3	2.7	0.8	19.7	5.0	0.0	0.6	0.7	11.5	28.1	100
Citizens Independent Social Thought Alliance	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	18.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	81.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100
Conservatives	12.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	60.0	0.0	1.2	0.0	0.0	1.2	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.9	14.2	100
Cross-Community Labour Alternative	12.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	11.4	0.0	0.0	18.5	14.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	43.5	100
Democratic Unionist Party - D.U.P.	12.9	0.0	0.2	0.0	31.8	0.4	3.4	0.2	6.9	1.9	0.3	0.0	4.9	1.6	23.4	12.1	100
Green Party	17.4	0.0	4.4	4.0	5.0	0.0	7.9	0.0	0.0	20.4	7.7	0.0	0.8	0.0	1.5	31.0	100
Independent	21.9	0.0	4.7	0.0	4.1	3.7	15.1	0.0	4.3	0.0	1.6	0.0	12.7	0.0	24.2	7.8	100
People Before Profit Alliance	0.0	0.0	0.1	2.5	0.0	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	39.1	6.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	49.6	100
Progressive Unionist Party of Northern Ireland	2.5	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	31.9	0.8	11.4	0.0	1.2	2.3	0.0	29.6	0.0	0.0	19.8	100
SDLP (Social Democratic & Labour Party)	11.2	0.0	0.2	0.3	4.4	0.9	3.5	1.7	0.2	1.8	15.4	0.0	0.2	0.0	23.5	36.9	100
Sinn Féin	7.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.6	3.4	6.1	0.1	41.1	24.5	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.7	15.7	100
The Workers Party	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	92.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100
Traditional Unionist Voice - TUV	3.7	0.0	1.4	0.2	32.3	1.3	1.4	0.0	2.9	5.0	5.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	46.7	100
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.9	0.0	0.0	74.5	0.0	0.0	19.7	100
Ulster Unionist Party	7.9	0.0	1.4	0.1	13.5	1.5	4.3	0.2	5.1	10.0	0.5	0.0	3.9	2.1	23.5	26.2	100
Totals	10.4	0.0	0.7	0.3	13.6	2.4	3.7	1.4	3.2	11.6	6.6	0.0	2.9	1.0	17.7	24.5	100

List of Abbreviations

CCLA   Cross-Community Labour Alternative

CISTA   Cannabis is Safer than Alcohol

Con   Conservative

DUP   Democratic Unionist Party

Ind   Independents

PBPA   People Before Profit Alliance

PUP   Progressive Unionist Party

SDLP   Social Democratic and Labour party

SF   Sinn Fein

TUV   Traditional Unionist Voice

UKIP   UK Independence Party

UUP   Ulster Unionist Party