

STV in Northern Ireland and proportional representation

I.D. Hill
d.hill928@btinternet.com

Even access to the complete voting pattern would not necessarily tell us what would have happened because, for one thing, the list of candidates might have been different if the number of seats were changed.

1 How many seats per constituency?

If STV is to give proportional representation, so far as can be done within the limits of practicality, it is necessary that the number of seats for each constituency should depend on the eligible electorate. In the present rules for Northern Ireland this is not done, but it is laid down that there shall be 6 seats for each constituency, and the degree of proportionality must suffer somewhat in consequence.

A reasonably good job appears to have been done in trying to equalise electorates to go with the equal numbers of seats, but the result is far from perfect. Table 1 shows the electorate sizes, as given by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, in March 2007 and how many seats each should have had for the Assembly election if allocation had been made by the Sainte-Laguë rule. The difference from 6 seats everywhere is not huge, and it may not have made any substantial political difference to the outcome, but there is no denying that it could have done, and any distortion may get worse over the years if no action is taken to correct it.

What any such political difference would have been we cannot tell without access to the votes. We can speculate about it, of course, but it is necessary to bear in mind that, in STV, the last seat in a multi-member constituency is nearly always marginal, and may turn out quite differently from the majority shown by the constituency. In particular, a change of the number of seats leads to an immediate change in the quota, and that alone can have an effect.

2 A further possibility

It could be argued, however, that it would be even better to use the number of valid votes, instead of the eligible electorate, thus making high turnout an advantage. Table 2 shows what this would have done. Compared with Table 1, East Antrim, Lagan Valley and North Down would each have lost a seat as a result of poor turnout, while Fermanagh & South Tyrone, Mid Ulster and Newry & Armagh would each have gained one for good turnout.

This would be perfectly possible. Each constituency could make its count of first preferences without knowing how many seats it would get, and report to a central point the total number of valid votes. As soon as all such reports were in, the central point would tell each constituency its number of seats and its quota, and the count could continue.

One slight disadvantage might be if voters hesitated to vote in case an extra seat were gained that they suspect might go to a disliked party, but that is probably not very likely to deter voters. It would certainly make party workers very cross if they put a lot of effort into getting a high turnout but, as a result, gained an extra seat that went to a different party.

This idea is in no way comparable to the “overhang” votes in the German electoral system. That is merely to allow for a slight difficulty in the system and it lessens proportionality by increasing the total number of seats in certain cases, whereas the present suggestion does not change the total number of seats but merely their allocation between constituencies. Those who seek to measure proportionality always seem to do so on the basis of valid votes,

not on eligible electorate, so it would be expected to improve things so far as those measures are concerned.

Party organisers might well object that it would hinder them not to know the number of seats in advance, but the aims of an electoral system should be: (1) to treat the voters well; (2) to treat the candidates well so far as possible without upsetting aim 1; (3) to treat party organisers well so far as possible without upsetting aims 1 or 2. The priorities should definitely be taken in that order.

3 What should be done?

I wish to emphasise that the suggestion in section 1 above is a standard part of STV thinking, and there seems to me to be no case for not making a change unless, in the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, it is found to be politically impossible. The suggestion in section 2, however, is no more than a bit of “thinking aloud” in the hope that others will comment on it.

4 References

- [1] The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.
www.eoni.org.uk/votes_polled_summary-2.pdf

<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Eligible Electorate</i>	<i>Seats due</i>
North Antrim	72814	7
South Down	71704	7
Newry & Armagh	70823	7
Upper Bann	70716	7
Lagan Valley	70101	7
Strangford	66648	6
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	65826	6
South Antrim	65654	6
Foyle	64889	6
Mid Ulster	61223	6
West Tyrone	58367	6
North Down	57525	6
East Antrim	56666	6
East Londonderry	56104	5
Belfast West	50792	5
Belfast East	49757	5
Belfast North	49372	5
Belfast South	48923	5

Table 1. Northern Ireland constituencies at the March 2007 Assembly election and the seats that each would have had if based on eligible electorate, under the Sainte-Laguë rule.

<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Valid Votes</i>	<i>Seats due</i>
Newry & Armagh	49619	8
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	46442	7
South Down	46110	7
North Antrim	44331	7
Mid Ulster	44277	7
Upper Bann	42882	7
Lagan Valley	41822	6
West Tyrone	41454	6
Foyle	41036	6
South Antrim	38175	6
Strangford	36019	6
East Londonderry	33922	5
Belfast West	33790	5
North Down	30707	5
Belfast South	30344	5
East Antrim	30039	5
Belfast North	29715	5
Belfast East	29629	5

Table 2. Northern Ireland constituencies at the March 2007 Assembly election and the seats that each would have had if based on valid votes, under the Sainte-Laguë rule.