

Electoral Systems and Political Manipulation: A Case Study of Northern Ireland in the 1920s

D. G. PRINGLE

St. Patrick's College, Maynooth

Précis: Three general elections were held for the Northern Ireland Parliament during the 1920s. The 1921 and 1925 elections were contested using proportional representation, whereas the 1929 elections used the "first-past-the-post system". This paper analyses how the change in the electoral system reversed the trend towards political plurality reflected in the 1925 election results, and facilitated the hegemony of the Unionist Party which continued for 40 years. The paper also discusses how the new electoral system facilitated changes within the Unionist Party itself.

I INTRODUCTION

Ireland was divided into two parts, Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland, by the Government of Ireland Act (1920), and elections were subsequently held in May, 1921, to elect a House of Commons and a Senate for each part. Sinn Féin returned 124 candidates unopposed (out of a total of 128 seats) in the Southern Parliament, and, as they adopted an abstentionist policy, Southern Ireland was stillborn (Beckett, 1966, p. 451). A Unionist victory in the North, however, resulted in the creation of the Northern Ireland Parliament, which was opened by King George V on 22 June, 1921, and which continued until the abolition of Stormont in 1972.

Three general elections were held for the Northern Ireland Parliament in the 1920s. The Government of Ireland Act specified that the single transferable vote method of proportional representation (PR) was to be used to elect the first Parliament, but, under Section 14 of the Act, the Parliament was empowered to change the electoral law after a period of three years, providing that the total number of seats was not altered (Harbinson, 1973, p. 107). PR was abolished in time for the local authority elections held in 1923 and 1924, but it was retained for the second general elections held in

1925. However, it was replaced by the "first-past-the-post" system (i.e., the system used in Britain) by the House of Commons (Method of Voting and Redistribution of Seats) Act shortly before the third general elections in 1929. It is argued that these changes had major implications for the later development of the Northern Ireland state.

This paper describes the results of the three Northern Ireland general elections in the 1920s in some detail, largely based upon the source material usefully presented by Knight and Baxter-Moore (1972). While it is hoped that the paper will be found to be of historical interest, the main objective is to highlight how the electoral law was manipulated to serve partisan party political and class objectives. This is useful, not only to an understanding of the historical development of Unionist hegemony in Northern Ireland, but also to serve as a warning against attempts to abolish PR in the Republic, as attempted, for example, by Fianna Fáil in 1959 and 1968 (O'Leary, 1979).

The abolition of PR in Northern Ireland in 1929 has recently become a miniature research growth area with at least three other works on the same subject appearing within the last year. There is obviously some degree of duplication in content between the present paper and these works, but the present paper differs both in emphasis and in interpretation. Osborne (1979), for example, provides a much more detailed discussion of the extent of gerrymandering and malapportionment associated with the new constituency boundaries, whereas the present paper places more emphasis upon the effects arising from the changes in the method of voting. The two papers are, therefore, complementary rather than contradictory.

The differences between the present paper and Buckland (1979) and Clifford (1980), however, are interpretative. Buckland's book deals with a much broader topic — the Northern Ireland State between 1921 and 1939 — but the chapter on discrimination in representation overlaps with the present paper. Buckland is primarily concerned with the effects that changes in the electoral system had in terms of discrimination against Catholics, but he makes little distinction between local government and Northern Ireland Parliamentary elections. This is unfortunate because although changes in local government were aimed at securing more councils for the Unionists at the expense of the Nationalists and Republicans by gerrymanders, the abolition of PR at parliamentary level served a totally different purpose. The Unionists had little to fear from the Nationalists and Republicans at parliamentary level; rather the major threat was a further continuation of the split in the Protestant vote along class lines which had become apparent in 1925. It is argued that the Unionists abolished PR to establish greater control of the Protestant vote, rather than to discriminate against Catholics. Clifford (1980), on the other hand, argues that the abolition of PR in 1929 had no

major effects on representation. This may be true in terms of the balance of "Protestant" and "Catholic" seats won, but it totally ignores the nascent class component in Northern Ireland politics.

The present paper also differs from the other three by examining some of the implications that the abolition of PR had on the class backgrounds of the Unionist candidates after 1929.

The paper is written in six sections. Sections II, III, and IV discuss the results of the 1921, 1925, and 1929 elections, respectively; the fifth considers to what extent gerrymandering was important in determining the results of the elections; the sixth reviews some of the longer-term implications of these changes; and the seventh pulls some of the threads together as a conclusion.

II THE 1921 ELECTIONS

The 1921 Northern Ireland Parliament was the first in Europe to be elected using the single transferable vote method of PR. For the purposes of these elections Northern Ireland was divided into ten multiple-seat constituencies based upon county boundaries (Figure 1). Four counties (Antrim, Armagh, Down, and Londonderry) were each regarded as one constituency, while the other two (Fermanagh and Tyrone) were aggregated to form a single

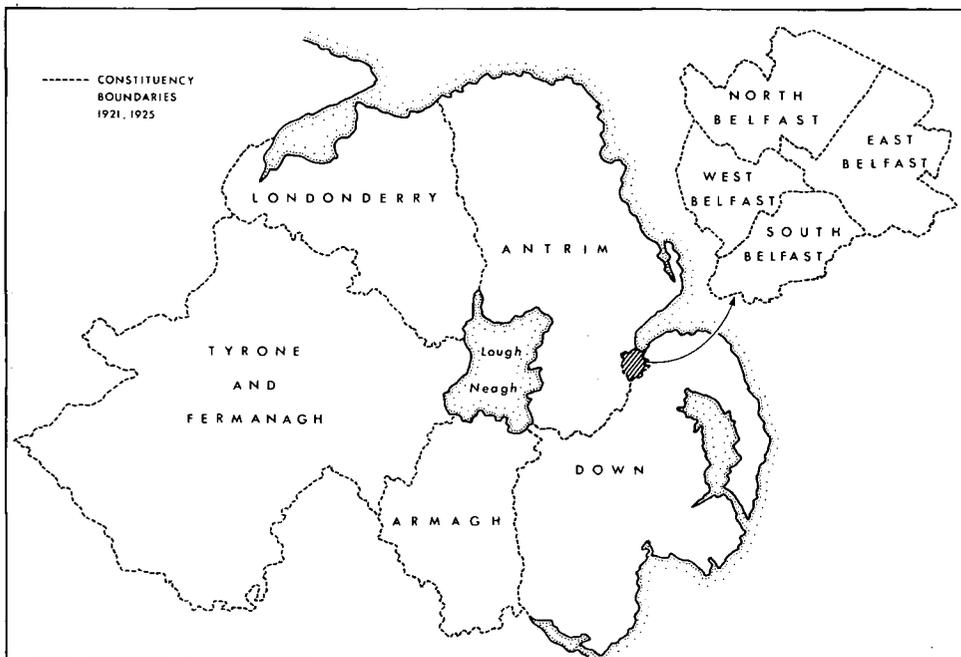


Figure 1: *Constituencies in 1921 and 1925*

constituency. The Belfast County Borough was divided into four constituencies, plus Queen's University which was treated as a constituency in its own right. The ten constituencies were also used for Westminster elections, using the first past-the-post electoral system.

Table 1: *Constituency sizes, 1921*

<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Electorate</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Voters/seat</i>
North Belfast	43,194	4	10,799
East Belfast	40,198	4	10,050
South Belfast	40,566	4	10,142
West Belfast	57,914	4	14,479
Antrim	93,566	7	13,367
Down	93,138	8	11,642
Londonderry	62,111	5	12,422
Armagh	53,977	4	13,494
Fermanagh Tyrone	95,272	8	11,909
Queen's University	2,528	4	632

The number of seats per constituency ranged between four and eight, roughly reflecting (with the exception of Queen's University) the size of the electorate (Table 1). The relationship, however, was far from perfect and contained a number of anomalies. Antrim, for example, had one seat less than Down, despite having a slightly larger population, but it is uncertain who these malapportionments favoured. For example, if the three Belfast constituencies with the lowest votes per seat ratio had been either aggregated to form larger constituencies or reduced to three-seaters, the Unionists would have lost seats. On the other hand, if any of the three constituencies with the largest votes per seat ratio had been increased by one seat to bring it into line with the others, the new quotas would have resulted in the extra seats being won by the Unionists. It would, therefore, appear that the constituency boundaries were not purposely designed to favour one side or the other, or else that they were done so in a strangely incompetent manner.

The major issue in the 1921 elections was the constitutional position of Northern Ireland (i.e., whether or not the Union was desirable). Voting, not surprisingly, was very strongly polarised between the Unionists (including Labour Unionists) on the one hand and the Nationalists and Sinn Féin on the other. The Belfast Labour Party (which later developed into the Northern Ireland Labour Party) did not contest the elections due to the divisive effects it would have had upon the Labour movement, but five members of the Independent Labour Party contested the elections as Independents (Clifford, 1979). These were the only candidates who did not

belong to one of the three main parties, but they made very little impression on the overall results. All five lost their deposits, polling a total of less than one per cent of the total votes. The 1921 elections, therefore, provide a fairly clear-cut indication of the wishes of the Northern Ireland population on the border issue.

The elections resulted in a very strong mandate for the Unionists, who won 40 of the 52 seats with 66.9 per cent of the total votes. Sinn Féin, whose successful candidates included Eamon de Valera (Down), Michael Collins (Armagh), Arthur Griffith (Fermanagh Tyrone), and Eoin McNeill (Londonderry), won six seats with 20.5 per cent of the votes, whereas the Nationalists also won six seats, but with only 11.8 per cent of the votes.

The Unionists gained the largest number of votes in all 10 constituencies and received more than 50 per cent of the votes in all but one – the exception being Fermanagh Tyrone. However, there were large variations in the percentage of votes gained by the Unionists between constituencies, ranging from 85.7 per cent in North Belfast to 45.3 per cent in Fermanagh Tyrone (Table 2). The highest percentages were all in the east of the province, corresponding very closely with the distribution of Protestants. (Queen's University is recorded as 100 per cent Unionist in Table 2, but it was not actually contested by any anti-Partitionist candidates.)

Table 2: *Percentages of first preference votes gained by each party, 1921^a*

<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Number of seats</i>	<i>Percentage poll</i>	<i>Sinn Féin</i>			
			<i>Unionist</i>	<i>Féin</i>	<i>Nationalist</i>	<i>Others</i>
North Belfast	4	93.4	85.7 (4)	8.1 (0)	3.8 (0)	2.3 (0)
East Belfast	4	90.0	81.6 (4)	10.0 (0)	6.6 (0)	1.8 (0)
South Belfast	4	90.1	85.5 (4)	7.5 (0)	4.6 (0)	2.4 (0)
West Belfast	4	93.2	61.6 (3)	17.3 (0)	20.5 (1)	0.7 (0)
Antrim	7	86.0	80.4 (6)	7.8 (0)	11.8 (1)	—
Down	8	88.2	68.9 (6)	20.6 (1)	9.0 (1)	1.5 (0)
Londonderry	5	87.7	56.2 (3)	29.4 (1)	14.3 (1)	—
Armagh	4	87.5	55.3 (2)	30.0 (1)	14.7 (1)	—
Fermanagh Tyrone	8	89.0	45.3 (4)	39.6 (3)	15.1 (1)	—
Queen's University	4	76.3	100.0 (4)	—	—	—

a Seats won are in parentheses.

The combined anti-Partitionist vote was naturally a mirror image of the Unionist vote, but there were notable variations in the balance between Sinn Féin and Nationalist votes. Sinn Féin did much better in the more rural west of the province where they more than doubled the Nationalist vote, but even in the east the Nationalists only managed to outpoll Sinn Féin in

two constituencies (Antrim and West Belfast). These, however, probably reflect a large personal vote for Joe Devlin, the Nationalist leader, who contested both constituencies.

One of the more interesting features of the 1921 elections was the very low percentage of votes transferred between parties. The absence of a significant number of transfers between the Unionists and either of the other two major parties is as one would expect, but transfers between the Nationalists and Sinn Féin were also almost non-existent. This had the effect of splitting the anti-Partitionist vote into two virtually self-contained blocs, thereby negating some of the advantages of the single transferable vote system. Although PR gives better representation to smaller parties than the first-past-the-post system, it still contains a built-in advantage in favour of the larger parties, due to the greater likelihood of votes being transferred out of the smaller blocs. The Unionists consequently won five seats more in 1921 than their share of the first preference votes would have justified if representation was purely proportional.

Table 3: Seats won (a) in relation to number justified (b) discrepancy = (c)

Constituency	Unionist			Sinn Féin			Nationalist		
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(a)	(b)	(c)	(a)	(b)	(c)
North Belfast	4	3.4	+6	0	0.3	-.3	0	0.2	-.2
East Belfast	4	3.3	+7	0	0.4	-.4	0	0.3	-.3
South Belfast	4	3.4	+6	0	0.3	-.3	0	0.2	-.2
West Belfast	3	2.5	+5	0	0.7	-.7	1	0.8	+2
Antrim	6	5.6	+4	0	0.5	-.5	1	0.8	+2
Down	6	5.5	+5	1	1.6	-.6	1	0.7	+3
Londonderry	3	2.8	+2	1	1.5	-.5	1	0.7	+3
Fermanagh Tyrone	4	3.6	+4	3	3.2	-.2	1	1.2	-.2
Armagh	2	2.2	-.2	1	1.2	-.2	1	0.6	+4
Queen's University	4	4.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Overall</i>	40	34.8	5.2	6	10.6	-4.6	6	6.1	-.1

The deviation between seats won and seats justified on the basis of the proportion of first preference votes is broken down by constituency in Table 3. It will be noted that, with the exception of Armagh, the Unionists gained from the "rounding off" of the number of seats justified (a "real" number) to the number actually won (an "integer"). This is because they were strong enough in every constituency to ensure that even the least supported Unionist candidate gained enough internal transfers to reach the quota. Almost all of the Unionist surplus votes were transferred to other Unionists.

Therefore, Unionist votes only became wasted (i.e., lost to the party) once all the Unionist candidates were elected.

Unionist success was also facilitated by gauging very accurately how many seats they could hope to win. The Unionists fielded 40 candidates and won 40 seats, without failing to reach the quota even once. Yet, in no constituency could the Unionists have won an additional seat if they had fielded an extra candidate. In short, their estimation of their support was perfect and was probably facilitated by the fact that voting closely reflected religious affiliation; the number of Protestants in each county (and hence constituency) was readily available from the census.

The two anti-Partitionist parties, on the other hand, were under-represented as a result of their much smaller support bases. Due to the smaller numbers of candidates, surplus votes and votes transferred on elimination of candidates were often transferred outside the party or, more frequently, simply wasted. As a result, in five constituencies the last candidate elected failed to reach the quota. The major reason why the Nationalists won as many seats as Sinn Féin, with only slightly more than half the number of votes, was that the Nationalists won all five of the non-quota seats. Joe Devlin, in fact, had the dubious distinction of not only being elected to the 1921 Parliament for two different constituencies, but of failing to reach the quota either time. Sinn Féin, in contrast, had the misfortune to provide the runner-up (i.e., the unsuccessful candidate with the largest number of votes) in every constituency but one. These results, however, were rendered somewhat academic by the boycott of the first Northern Ireland Parliament by Sinn Féin and Nationalist MPs alike.

III THE 1925 ELECTIONS

The 1925 elections, like those in 1921, were contested using the single transferable vote method of PR. However, the situation had changed considerably since 1921, resulting in two major electoral swings: (1) the Unionists lost a substantial number of votes to Labour and Independent Unionist candidates, and (2) the Nationalists took over from the Republicans (the successors of Sinn Féin) as the major "opposition" party.

These trends are both reflected by the percentage of first preference votes received by each party (Table 4). These percentages, however, are not totally comparable with those in 1921 due to the fact that only eight constituencies were contested in 1925. The sitting MPs in Down and Queen's University were returned *en bloc* without a contest. (It is perhaps of interest to note that the eight Down MPs included not only the Prime Minister (Craig), but also a future Prime Minister (Andrews) and a future Taoiseach and President of the Republic (de Valera)).

Table 4: *Percentages of first preference votes and seats won, 1921 and 1925*

<i>Party</i>	<i>1921</i>		<i>1925</i>	
	<i>Votes (per cent)</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Votes (per cent)</i>	<i>Seats</i>
Unionist	66.9	40	55.0	32
Independent Unionist	—	—	9.0	4
Labour	0.6	0	4.7	3
Sinn Fein/Republican	20.5	6	5.4	2
Nationalist	11.8	6	23.8	10
Others	0.2	0	2.1	1

The Unionist share of the votes dropped by almost 12 per cent, but the aggregate figures hide a very marked regional variation. In the rural west of the province the Unionist share of the vote was not significantly different from what it had been in 1921, but in the east, particularly in the four Belfast constituencies, there is strong evidence of Protestant working class disillusionment with the Unionist party. By 1925 the unemployment rate had risen to 24 per cent, and bread and butter issues began to take on an increased importance as the national question lost some of its urgency. The Unionists consequently not only lost three seats to Labour (in North, East, and West Belfast), but also four to Independent Unionists (in North, East, South, and West Belfast), although two were to the same candidate (P. J. Woods). Analysis of the transfers of votes reveals very strong transfers between Labour and Independent Unionist candidates, but only very weak transfers between Independent Unionists and Unionists in North, East, and West Belfast. The situation was not quite so clear-cut in the more middle-class South Belfast constituency, but even there the Independent Unionist candidate's surplus tended to transfer to the unsuccessful Town Tenants candidate, rather than to the Unionists.

Protestant working class disillusionment with the Unionist Party was also reflected by the defeat of three of the four Belfast Labour Unionist MPs. The Labour Unionists were members of the UULA (Ulster Unionist Labour Association, formed in 1918 by trade unionists) who had been adopted somewhat reluctantly, and largely due to the insistence of Edward Carson, as official Unionist Party candidates in the 1918, and successive, elections. The objective was to broaden the Unionist Party's class base and to counter possible non-Unionist opposition from the Labour movement (Buckland, 1973, pp. 135-43). However, despite their trade unionist backgrounds, the Labour Unionist MPs were not particularly noted for their defence of working class demands. Their defeat in 1925, due to the transfer of their erst-

while support to Labour and Independent Unionists, therefore represented a very serious challenge to the Unionist Party. Unionist control of the 16 Belfast seats dropped from 15 in 1921 to only eight in 1925. None of the seats were lost to Nationalists or Republicans. Rather, the major threat to the Unionist Party came from within the Loyalist ranks itself, fostered by class grievances. This was less apparent in the rural areas, but it is significant that the other seat lost by the Unionists (in Antrim) fell to the Unbought Tenants, suggesting the possibility of even rural disenchantment.

The other significant swing in the 1925 elections was the emergence of the Nationalists as the major anti-Partitionist party. The Nationalist vote, which was more than twice that in 1921, resulted in four extra seats. These gains were totally at the expense of the Republicans. Several factors appear to have been important. First, bitterness between the Nationalists and the Republicans was at a high point following the intervention of the Republicans in the October 1924 Westminster elections. These were contested using the first-past-the-post system; consequently the anti-Partitionist vote would have been split had the Nationalists not withdrawn. However, the Republicans did very poorly, partly due to the Nationalists urging their supporters not to vote, with the result that the Unionists gained the two formerly Nationalist seats in Fermanagh-Tyrone. The 1925 vote for the Nationalists was, therefore, partly a reaction against the Republicans for intervening in 1924.

Other factors, however, included an abhorrence of Republican violence, the decision by the Nationalists to take their seats if elected, and the close identification of the Nationalist Party with the Catholic Church. Eight of the eleven Nationalist candidates in 1925 were proposed by Catholic priests, and Archdeacon Convery of Belfast wrote a letter to the *Irish News* in which he expressed the hope "to see all the Catholic voters united like a bar of steel over the six counties" (Farrell, 1976, p. 103). The association of the Nationalist Party with the Catholic Church was partly a reaction to the association of the Unionist Party with Protestantism, but it also facilitated the later recovery of the Unionist Party. A Protestant class alliance could only be re-forged if there was an obvious common enemy. The Nationalists played their role admirably.

IV THE 1929 ELECTIONS

The 1925 elections highlighted the fact that the major threat to the Unionists was neither the Nationalists nor the Republicans, whose combined vote had, if anything, declined, but the possibility of a split in the Protestant ranks along class divisions. This is not to say that everyone who voted Labour or Independent Unionist in 1925 was either working-class or Pro-

testant. In fact, the three successful Labour candidates appear to have gained as much support from Catholics as Protestants. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, with only one exception, whenever the Unionists were opposed by candidates other than Republicans or Nationalists they had been defeated (Bell, 1976 p. 100).

The Unionist response to this situation was to use the powers given to them, under the Government of Ireland Act, to change the electoral system to the simpler first-past-the-post system used in the Westminster elections. The objective, as stated by Craigavon, was to eliminate all electoral issues except the national question,

What I want to get in this house and what I believe we will get very much better in this house under the old-fashioned plain and simple system, are men who are for the Union on the one hand, or who are against it and want to go into a Dublin parliament on the other (Farrell, 1976, p. 111).

Nine of the ten existing constituencies were consequently divided into 48 smaller single-seat constituencies, each constituency being divided so as to retain the same number of seats as it had in 1925 (Figure 2). The exception

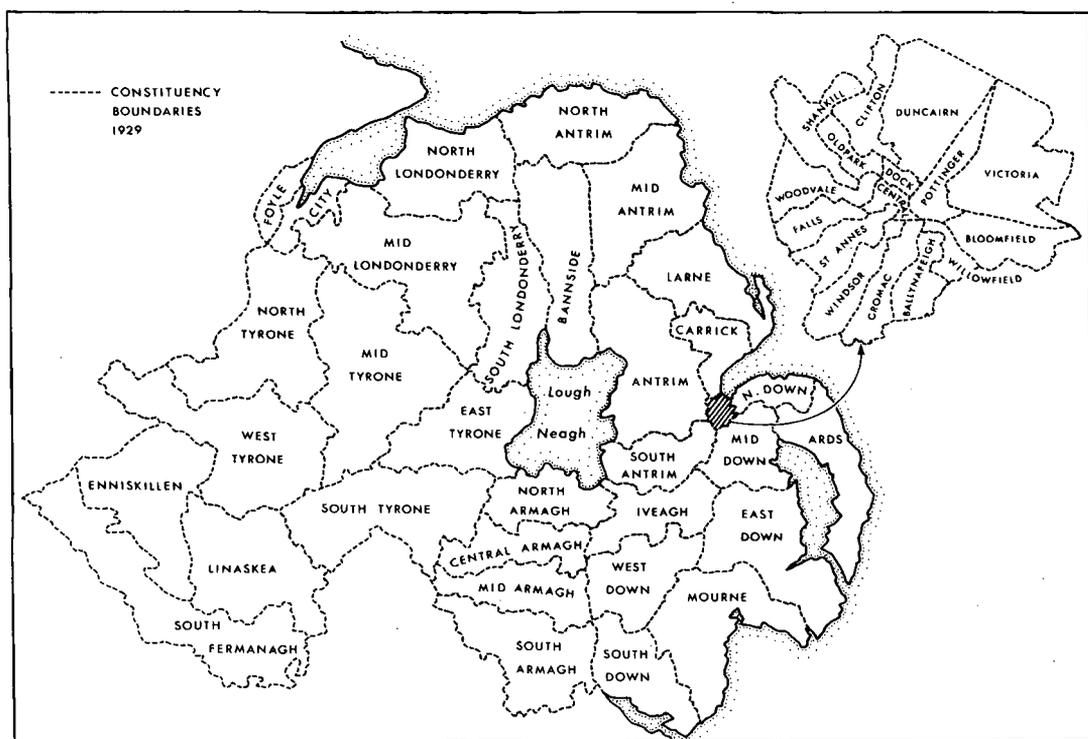


Figure 2: *Constituencies in 1929*

was Queen's University which could not be spatially divided, and which was, therefore, retained as a four-seat PR constituency until its abolition in 1969. The procedure used to decide upon the new constituency boundaries is outlined in some detail by Osborne (1979), but the constituency boundaries had a relatively minor influence upon the results of the elections (see below).

Of much more importance was the abolition of PR. This adversely affected the Labour and Independent Unionist candidates in two ways. First, by introducing single-seat constituencies, minority parties had much less chance of gaining representation. All seats simply went to the candidate with the greatest number of votes. Consequently candidates who were able to gain enough votes to reach the quota under PR often found that their support was insufficient to provide a simple majority under the new system, especially if their support was spatially divided between several of the new constituencies. Second, the abolition of PR reduced the variety of issues which were relevant to the outcome of the election. This particularly disadvantaged the Labour candidates who had deliberately tried to avoid the national issue in previous elections. The Unionists pushed the national question to the fore and implied that any non-Unionist vote was necessarily anti-Partitionist. Again to quote Craigavon,

What I have been afraid of under the proportional representation system was that certain members might be returned to the House who in a crisis upon the one point of vital importance to the Ulster people, might not stand on which side it was intended they should stand when elected (Bell, 1976, p. 101).

One of the Unionist slogans in the 1929 elections was consequently "Safety First – Vote Unionist".

Table 5: *Percentages of votes and number of seats won, 1925 and 1929*

<i>Party</i>	<i>1925</i>		<i>1929</i>	
	<i>Votes (per cent)</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Votes (per cent)</i>	<i>Seats</i>
Unionist	55.0	32	50.7	37
Independent Unionist	9.0	4	14.2	3
Labour	4.7	3	8.9	1
Republican	5.4	2	—	—
Nationalist	23.8	10	13.0	11
Liberal	—	—	7.4	0
Others	2.1	1	5.8	0

The net effect of the electoral changes was that the representation of the minor parties (excluding Republicans) was reduced from eight to four (Table 5). The Independent Unionists lost two seats to the Unionists, but gained one in Queen's University where the PR system significantly still operated. The other two successful Independent Unionists had little in common. J. W. Nixon (Woodvale) was a retired RUC Inspector who had run foul of the Unionist Party because he was too extreme, whereas T. Henderson, a sitting MP, retained enough of the populist vote to narrowly defeat the Unionist Party candidate in Shankill.

Labour lost two of their three seats, one to the Unionists, the other to the Nationalists, despite the fact that the Labour vote actually increased, both in terms of absolute numbers and as a proportion of the total (Table 5). Part of the reason for this increase was that in three of the four Belfast seats contested by Labour, the party was involved in a straight fight with the Unionists. They, therefore, presumably gained from Catholic anti-Unionist votes, as well as from pro-Labour votes. Thus, a large percentage of the Labour votes in the Oldpark, Dock, and Pottinger constituencies were probably from Catholics in the Ardoyne, New Lodge Road, and Short Strand enclaves, respectively. Nevertheless, the sole successful Labour candidate, J. Beattie (Pottinger), probably owed most of his success to the fact that he was an outgoing MP. One of the long-term implications of the new system was that minority candidates, by virtue of being excluded from representation, could no longer build upon their achievements in office. Their chances of being elected were, therefore, further reduced by being an unknown quantity to most of their electorate.

The Unbought Tenants' MP (G. Henderson) contested Bannside, but despite a fairly good performance he, too, lost his seat to the Unionists. The Unionists were the major beneficiaries from the demise of the smaller factions, making, as noted above, a net gain of three seats. However, they also gained a seat from both the Nationalists and the Republicans (who did not contest the elections) in Antrim and Armagh, respectively, bringing their total to 37 seats.

The pro-Union/anti-Partitionist balance was not, however, significantly altered. Although the Nationalists lost their Antrim seat to the Unionists, this was compensated by the gain of a West Belfast seat from Labour which had previously been won by the Unionists in 1921. The 1921 balance would, therefore, have been preserved had one of the two Republican seats not been gained by the Unionists. The other Republican seat (South Down) was won by the Nationalists, giving them a net gain of one seat.

Table 5 clearly shows how the new electoral system successfully polarised representation on Craigavon's "one point of vital importance". It will be noted that the Unionist gains were at the expense of the candidates who had

challenged them on class issues, and not at the expense of the anti-Partitionist section of the community. The Nationalist total of 11 seats was, in fact, the highest they ever obtained in any general election, and more than was justified by their proportion of the total votes cast (Osborne, 1979).

V CONSTITUENCY BOUNDARIES: EVIDENCE OF GERRYMANDERING

The abolition of PR favoured the Unionists because, although the minor parties could occasionally gain enough votes to reach the quota, they rarely had enough support to provide a majority. However, the new system also increased the possibility of securing additional advantage by gerrymandering the constituency boundaries. Gerrymandering is much simpler in the first-past-the-post system and, given that it was the Unionist Government who decided how the old constituencies were to be divided, it is useful to try to evaluate to what extent Unionist gains were due to gerrymandering, as opposed simply to changes in the electoral system.

When PR in local government had been abolished in 1923, Sir John Leech, KC, had been appointed by the Unionist Government to draw the new electoral boundaries. The subsequent local government elections results testified to his gerrymandering prowess when Nationalist control was reduced from 25 local authorities to only two (Omagh and Strabane UD's). The Nationalist boycott of some of the elections (partly in protest against the gerrymanders) made the results much more one-sided than they would otherwise have been (Farrell, 1976, p. 84), but the major factor was clearly Leech's gerrymanders.

In the case of the parliamentary constituencies introduced in 1929 the evidence is not so clear-cut. For maximum efficiency, gerrymanders should produce small majorities for the governing party and large majorities for the opposition. In this way almost all of the pro-government votes help to elect someone, whereas opposition votes are wasted by either providing large minorities or excessively large majorities. In the case of the 1929 elections, however, this does not appear to have been the case. Rather, the constituencies appear to have been drawn to produce either substantial Protestant majorities or substantial Catholic majorities. Thus, for example, the Unionist constituency of Derry City was extended by an irregular boundary to include rural Protestant areas which would otherwise have formed part of the Nationalist Mid-Londonderry constituency (Figure 2). Likewise, the Belfast Central constituency was horseshoe-shaped to include a number of Catholic areas, but to exclude the Protestant Sandy Row area which was included in the Unionist constituency of St. Anne's.

The fact that only two constituencies were even contested by both the Unionists and the Nationalists (Belfast Central and Mourne), and that both

resulted in clear Nationalist majorities rather than narrow Unionist majorities, suggests that the constituencies were not gerrymandered so as to produce narrow Protestant majorities, but to separate people according to the "one point of vital importance". Indeed, attempts to gerrymander narrow Protestant majorities would probably have proved to be a dangerous tactic, given that Protestants could not at that point be relied upon to vote Unionist. This could have resulted in seats being lost to the Nationalists due to a split vote.

On the other hand, the Unionist gain of an anti-Partitionist seat in Armagh was facilitated by drawing the boundaries so as to produce a massive Catholic majority in South Armagh, and three smaller, but still substantial, Protestant majorities in the rest of the county. The Catholic votes, which had previously helped to elect a second anti-Partitionist candidate under PR, were now wasted either as minorities or as an excess majority. Likewise, although the Unionist/anti-Partitionist balance of seats was maintained in Fermanagh Tyrone, this was only achieved by gerrymandering the constituencies to produce a large Catholic majority in the linear South Fermanagh constituency and two smaller Unionist majorities in Enniskillen and Lisnakea. Thus, despite an overall Nationalist majority in the county, the Unionists managed to comfortably win two of the three seats. (For a more detailed discussion, see Osborne, 1979.)

The Nationalist seat gained by the Unionists in Antrim would also appear to have been as the result of a gerrymander. In this case, the Catholic enclave in the northern Glens of Antrim was divided between two constituencies, thereby ensuring that Nationalist votes would produce two small minorities. However, even if the Glens had been included in the same constituency, there would not have been enough Nationalist votes to produce a majority. The Unionist gain in Antrim arose out of the abolition of PR and the division of the small Catholic minority between several constituencies, rather than from gerrymandering as such.

Taking Northern Ireland as a whole, although evidence of gerrymandering is to be found, it does not appear to have been the main objective. Nor did it make any major difference to the overall Unionist/anti-Partitionist balance. Had the Unionists been able to rely with confidence on the full support of the Protestant population, it is possible that they may have been able to gerrymander an extra seat or two, but there was little need, given that the Nationalist opposition would be impotent anyway. (This was demonstrated in 1932 when the Nationalists walked out of the Parliament in frustration at not being able to get the Government to discuss serious social problems, including unemployment which stood at 76,000.) The major concern of the Unionists in 1929 was not to gain extra seats at the expense of the National-

ists by gerrymandering, but to regain the seats lost to Labour and the Independent Unionists. This was facilitated by changing the electoral system.

VI OTHER LONGER-TERM IMPLICATIONS

The changes in the electoral system had two longer-term implications of interest. First, the first-past-the-post system resulted in a larger number of uncontested seats because it was usually fairly obvious whether each seat had a pro- or anti-Partitionist majority, while other issues were relegated to minor importance. Thus, in 1929 no fewer than 22 seats (17 Unionists and 5 Nationalist) were uncontested, mostly in the more polarised west of the province (Figure 3). This set the pattern for future elections. In the next general election (1933), 23 Unionist MPs were returned unopposed, and five others had either died or retired, leaving only nine to actually contest their seats. The introduction of the first-past-the-post system not only denied minorities representation; it also, in many instances, denied them even the opportunity of voting.

Second, consolidation of Unionist control resulted in a consolidation of power within the Unionist Party itself. This is illustrated by comparing the

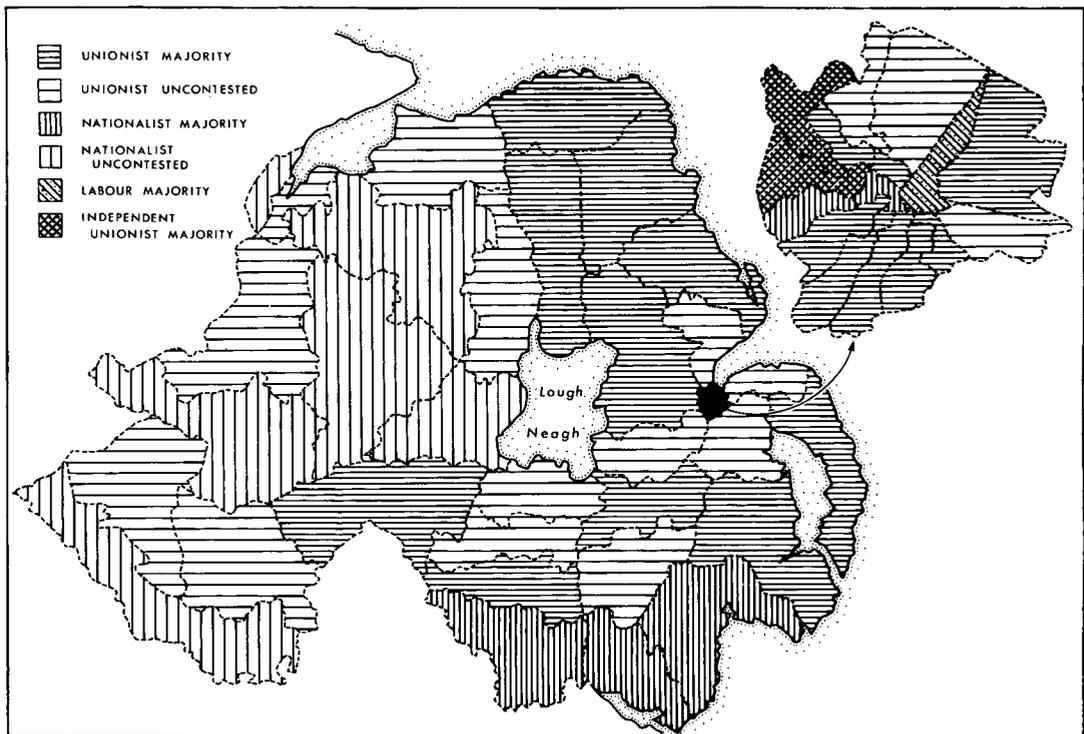


Figure 3: *Election results in 1929*

socio-economic backgrounds of candidates in 1921 with those in 1929, using data provided by Knight and Baxter-Moore (1972) and Harbinson (1973). This is summarised in Table 6. Many of the candidates in 1929 were survivors from 1921, so to highlight the changing socio-economic background of new candidates it is useful to distinguish between candidates who contested both elections and those who contested only one. The shift in power within the Unionist Party is, therefore, best seen by comparing the first and third columns in Table 6.

Table 6: *Socio-economic background of Unionist candidates*

	1921 only	1921 and 1929	1929 only	Net change
Business	8	10	4	-4
Skilled workers	2	3	0	-2
Law	2	4	5	+3
Other professional	2	1	1	-1
Landowners	4	2	7	+3
Farmers	0	1	1	+1
Retired services	0	0	2	+2
Others	1	0	1	0

Although the actual numbers involved are fairly small, the major trends are quite pronounced. The major element throughout the 1920s was from business backgrounds — mostly company directors, but including a few from lower managerial classes. By the end of the 1920s, however, large landowners were becoming more prominent. In 1921 Protestant workers were persuaded to vote for the leaders of industry in order to secure their livelihood, but by 1929 they were simply encouraged to vote for the Unionist candidate. Under the new system the electorate were not able to express preferences between Unionist candidates, but rather either had to vote for the nominated candidate or against him. The Party leadership were no longer obliged to nominate candidates with whom the electorate could in some way identify. Retired army officers with double-barrelled names became more frequent in the list of Unionist Party candidates after 1929 (e.g., Capt. J. Chichester-Clark, Lt.-Col. S. Hall-Thompson and Maj. C. Blakiston-Houston).

Also noticeable by their absence were new working class candidates to replace the Labour Unionists defeated in 1925. Under PR, they had been necessary to broaden the Unionist Party's appeal in working class constituencies (although, as illustrated in 1925, not always successfully), but with the introduction of the first-past-the-post system, and the return to the "one

point of vital importance", they had outlived their purpose. Given that a vote against the official Unionist Party candidate was considered equivalent to voting for the Nationalists, the Unionist Party elite no longer had to devolve any more power than they desired. The changes in the electoral system, therefore, not only enabled the Unionists to secure more control of the Protestant vote; it also permitted the party elite to secure more control of their own Party, and it is of interest to note that working class Unionists in Belfast favoured PR on the grounds that it "would help to broaden the social basis of the party's representation" (Buckland, 1979, p. 230). Several seats, particularly in rural areas, became effectively heirlooms which were passed on within the family from one (non-) election to the next. The same phenomenon is not, of course, unknown in the Republic under PR, but in the North the first-past-the-post system reduced the possibility of the electorate spoiling things, provided that the national question could be maintained as the major issue. This would not have been possible without the "assistance" of the Nationalists in the North and successive Governments in the South.

VII DISCUSSION

The Unionists have been the subject of alleged electoral malpractices in Northern Ireland almost since the creation of the State. This case study shows that at least some of these allegations are not without foundation. However, the malpractices discussed here were not gerrymanders designed to discriminate against the Nationalist minority, but rather were aimed at re-asserting Unionist dominance over Protestant voters by changes in the method of voting.

Despite the fact that the 1921 elections were fought using PR, the Unionists had achieved a remarkable victory because of the dominance of the constitutional question as the major election issue. However, the 1925 elections reflected the collapse of the plausibility of the Unionist Party for a section of the Protestant working class in a period of rapidly rising unemployment, especially in Belfast where PR facilitated the loss of almost half of the Unionist seats. The 40 seats won by the Unionists in 1921 was their highest total ever, but the 32 won in 1925 was, in contrast, the lowest ever. Given the strength of the sectarian divide and the size of the Protestant majority, the anti-Partitionist parties did not provide any threat at all to the Unionist majority, but the possibility of the Protestant vote being further split on class issues was a much more serious challenge.

This challenge from "within", however, was stamped out by the abolition of PR. This not only removed the possibility of minority representation, but it also reduced the number of issues of importance to the outcome of the

elections to one — the constitutional question. By casting aspersions about the loyalty of candidates who wished to raise other issues, the Unionists were able to manipulate a situation more similar to that in 1921.

Buckland (1979, p. 235) suggests that Craig “wanted what he saw as the fundamental issue of Northern Ireland politics — Unionism versus Nationalism — laid clearly before the electors”. This is undoubtedly true, but it is only half the truth. The Unionist Party were by no means a classless party who simply stood for the Union; they were also a conservative party with strong vested economic interests (although they drew a large support from all classes). The abolition of PR was more than an electoral tactic to win more seats; it was also a mechanism serving hidden class interests by eliminating class opposition, both within and outside the party. Opposition from outside the party was eliminated by the reduction in the number of important issues; opposition inside was eliminated due to the fact that only one Unionist could stand for each constituency. Following the creation of more safe seats, the Unionist Party were able to nominate whoever they liked, safe in the knowledge that as often as not the seat would not even be contested.

It is important to note that these changes in the electoral system had very little impact upon the pro-Union/anti-Partitionist balance of seats. This is in total contrast to effects of the abolition of PR in local government. In the case of local government the objective was to gain control from the Nationalists in as many local authorities as possible, but given that the Unionists already had a strong majority in the regional parliament, there was little need to gain extra seats at the expense of the Nationalists. In fact, a reasonably strong Nationalist opposition was beneficial to the Unionists in that it encouraged Protestant voters to forget their class grievances and to rally under the Unionist banner in the face of the “common enemy”. The Government in fact rejected several gerrymanders which had been proposed by local Unionists intent on maximising their own representation (Buckland, 1979, p. 240), presumably in the interests of the party as a whole.

It should also be noted that the advantages gained by the Unionists in 1929 were due almost entirely to the abolition of PR. They did not arise from more blatantly corrupt practices such as gerrymanders or malapportionment. This point is particularly important when considered in the context of occasional attempts to abolish PR in the Republic. It would be foolhardy to draw too many conclusions from the Northern Ireland experience, given that it has a totally different political environment, but the indications are that the abolition of PR would eliminate minority representation, reduce the variety of important electoral issues, and possibly lead to a further concentration of power in the hands of political elites. In short, it would be a very serious blow to democracy.

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