

Euro elections – the contest in Northern Ireland

 democraticaudit.com/2014/05/19/euro-elections-the-contest-in-northern-ireland/

By Democratic Audit UK

2014-5-19

*For many decades now the political scene in Northern Ireland has been distinctive within the UK, with major social and political divisions running on Catholic/republican versus Protestant/unionist lines, and a province-specific set of political parties. This separateness is certain to continue at this week's European elections, when in addition Northern Ireland uses the Single transferable Vote (STV) election system to count votes and award its three seats. The **Democratic Audit** team show what happened last time, what could happen this time, and which candidates are standing.*



Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland (Credit: Etrusia UK, CC by NC SA 2.0)

Northern Ireland has an entirely different political dynamic to the rest of the UK due to its unique and troubled history. While Scotland and Wales have nationalist parties standing against the main UK parties to different degrees of success, Northern Ireland's party system is entirely different with the top four parties including two mainly Catholic/republican parties, Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP, the more moderate of the two); and two mainly protestant and unionist parties, the Democratic Unionists (DUP) and the Ulster Conservative and Unionist (UCU, the more moderate of the two). The Alliance Party and the Green struggle to be non-aligned on sectarian grounds. Since the 1998 Good Friday agreement, and the 2007 power-sharing agreement, all the main parties have agreed to co-exist in the Northern Irish Assembly and each contribute ministers in the power-sharing Executive.

What happened last time

Previous European Parliament elections in Northern Ireland have seen the DUP and the Ulster Unionists consistently win two of the province three seats. The SDLP's status as the main standard-bearer for the Catholic, republican left was usurped by Sinn Fein in 2004. In the 2009 election, Sinn Fein finished first, with the UCU

second, and the DUP third. The SDLP came in fourth. Each party only stands one candidate, so these top three parties each returned a single MEP.

What happened last time, June 2009

Party Name	Count 1 Vote (in 000s)	First preference vote share (%)	Count 2 (in 000s)	Count 3 (in 000s)	Elected	Candidate Name
Sinn Fein	126.2	26			1	Bairbre de Brun
UCU	88.3	18.2	94.3	132.2	1	Jim Nicholson
DUP	82.9	17.1	91.3	115.7	1	Diane Dodds
SDLP	78.5	16.2	94.8	97.4	0	Alban Maginness
Traditional Unionist Voice	66.2	13.7			0	Jim Allister
Alliance Party	26.7	5.5			0	Ian Parsley
Others	15.7	3.3			0	
Total	484.6	100			3	

Note: Our vote data are rounded to the nearest thousand votes. Exact 2009 results are available from UK Polling Report [here](#). Bairbre de Brun stepped down as an MEP in 2012, and her place on Sinn Fein's list was taken by Martina Andreasen who won the seat at the resulting by-election. Jim Nicholson and Diane Dodds are both standing for re-election.

Northern Ireland is the only UK European Parliament constituency to use the method of the 'Single Transferrable Vote' to elect its MEP's, and we adapt this description of how it works from the LSE's [Simple Guide to Voting Systems](#) used in the UK. The whole region is one constituency with three representatives, and the aim is to allocate seats in a fully proportional way, matching how many representatives a party wins closely to its votes share, and giving voters the chance to indicate multiple preferences. (In the UK the same system is used for all local government elections in Scotland, and in Northern Ireland for local and Assembly elections. Elsewhere in the world the system is used to elect parliaments in Ireland itself and Malta).

On the STV ballot paper each party stands one candidate and voters mark their preference using numbers, so putting 1 for their top choice, 2 for their second choice, 3 for their third, and so on. If they want to, voters can support candidates from across different parties, so as to exactly match their personal preferences. A complex counting process then operates that allocates seats in an order to the candidates that have most votes, so as to get the best fit possible between total party vote shares (across first, second, third etc preferences) and their number of local MPs.

So how does this system work in practice? We look at the votes and divide them by the number of seats being contested +1. This gives a 'quota', a vote share that guarantees a party one seat. In a three-seat constituency the quota is 100% of the vote divided by 3 +1, or 25%. Any party with more than this quota gets a seat straightaway. In 2009 Sinn Fein was the only party to do this, partly because the Unionist vote was divided between the DUP, UCU and the protest party, Traditional Unionist Voice. Every time we give the party a seat, we deduct one quota share of votes from its total, so Sinn Fein could not win any more seats.

In 2009 that left two MEPs not yet allocated, and at least three leading parties (DUP, UCU and SDLP) with a plausible claim to one. Here the STV system shifts into a different method, by beginning to knock out candidates from the bottom. Generally with STV we take the least popular candidate and eliminate them from the race, and then redistribute their voters' second preferences across the candidates still in the race. We keep doing this until one of the parties still in the race has enough votes for a quota and so wins the next seat. We then deduct this quota from that party's votes (as above) and carry on with the 'knocking out the bottom candidate' process until all the seats are allocated.

In 2009 the column Count 2 in Table 1 above shows that none of the three parties reached the quota level (around 120,000 votes) with the first reallocation, but that UCU did on the next Count 3. That left only one seat to allocate and

the DUP beat the SDLP to the last MEP.

What could happen this time?

Since there is only one candidate per party in Northern Ireland, and the STV is very familiar to voters there, there is no need to present a simplified ballot paper as we have for [other regions](#). Given the religious and political make-up of the Northern Ireland electorate, it is likely that the 2014 outcome will be relatively similar to that last time, with the most likely result being that the DUP, Sinn Fein, and UCU each win one seat each. Sinn Fein will be looking to repeat their surprise first placed finish of 2009. Their MEP from the 2012 by-election, Martina Anderson, can be confident of taking her place. The incumbent MEPs for both the unionist parties are standing for re-election, and Diane Dodds of the DUP and UCU's Jim Nicholson can also both be pretty confident of success. The SDLP finished a close fourth last time, but will perhaps be hoping that the arrest of Gerry Adams on suspicion of involvement in a murder during the Troubles boosts their vote share amongst more moderate republicans.

The leading candidates

Sinn Fein's candidate is their incumbent MEP [Martina Anderson](#), who won a by-election victory in 2012. Prior to this, she was a Member of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly. Information about her record in the European Parliament has been collected by the independent and well respected organisation [Votewatch EU](#). She is on Twitter [here](#). She is near certain to be re-elected.



[Jim Nicholson](#) is an incumbent MEP representing the **UCU (Ulster Conservative and Unionist Party)** having first been elected in 1989 and re-elected in subsequent European Parliamentary Elections. Full details about his record as an MEP can be found on his [Votewatch EU profile](#) here. His Twitter account is [here](#). He can be confident of winning re-election.



The **Democratic and Unionist Party (DUP)'s** candidate is [Diane Dodds](#) who was first elected as an MEP in 2009. More information about her record in the European Parliament since her election can be found on her [Votewatch UE profile](#), which is [here](#). She was previously a councillor and teacher in Northern Ireland. More information about her can be found [here](#) and she's on Twitter [here](#). She stands a very strong of being elected.



[Alex Attwood](#) is the **SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party)** candidate for the constituency. He is currently a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly for Belfast West since the Assembly's creation, and was previously a Minister of the Environment and a Minister for Social Development. He is on Twitter, and his profile is [here](#). The SDLP missed out narrowly last time and will be hoping that they can close the gap sufficiently in order to see him elected.



Standing for the **TUV (Traditional Unionist Voice)** party is its leader, [Jim Allister](#). He was formerly a member of the DUP, and an MEP, but resigned in 2007 in protest at his party leadership's decision to enter into government with Sinn Fein. After this, he founded Traditional Unionist Voice. He is a Member of the Northern Irish Assembly for North Antrim and holds strong views on social issues, plus Northern Irish and Irish domestic issues. He is on Twitter [here](#). His presence may eat into the DUP and UCU votes, to the benefit of Sinn Fein and the SDLP.



[Anna Lo](#) is the number one candidate for the non-sectarian **Alliance Party**. Born in Hong Kong, she was the first ethnic-minority politician elected at a regional level in Northern Ireland after winning the Belfast South seat at the 2007 Northern Ireland Assembly election. She is a former social worker who has lived in Northern Ireland for more than 30 years.



The boundaries of **Northern Ireland** are well known, bordering the Irish counties of Louth, Monaghan, Cavan,

Leitrim, and Donegal to the South and West. It is divided from the rest of the UK by the Irish Sea. Belfast is its capital and largest city.

—

[Click here to see Democratic Audit's other Euro election briefings](#)

Note: please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. The shortened URL for this post is: <http://buff.ly/1mNiciR>