

ARE MALTESE PARTY LOYALTIES WANING? AN EXPLORATION OF THE ELECTION DATA

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Author's Note: This article first appeared in the Bank of Valletta Review, No.10, Autumn 1994. Two more elections have been held since that time and each produced a defeat of the incumbent government. The changes in the two major parties' vote percentage were about four percentage points each time -- a magnitude not seen in Malta for 25 years. (An updated version of Table 1 of this article, which shows the specifics of these shifts, has been placed at the end of the article.)

In light of these election results, some of the conclusions reached in this 1994 article need to be re-examined and possibly revised in light of the 1996 and 1998 elections. Still, the remarkable party "solidarity" and party "exclusivity" have not changed in the most recent elections, as can be seen from the updated Tables 2 and 3 which have also been placed at the end of the article. And the problems of obtaining reliable evidence and the problems of interpretation, which are central to the article, undoubtedly persist.

John Lane; October 1998

Introduction

By all accounts, the identification of Maltese voters with a particular political party has been remarkably strong and stable for many years. So it is noteworthy that a consensus view has emerged about changes in the most recent election:

"After the last general election political commentators were unanimous in stating that the 1992 elections were significant in that for the first time we were witnessing the growing strength of voters who did not identify themselves with any particular political party."
(Austin Gatt, writing in the Malta Independent, 7 November 1993)

If 1992 indeed witnessed a growing number of these voters, then a major shift in Maltese politics would be under way. Assuming that the election of 1992 was such a watershed event, it is worth exploring how voters would have behaved if their partisan attachments were severed or weakened or fluctuating. How would they have translated their changed attitudes into corresponding behaviour at the time of the election?

Four Possibilities

There are at least four possibilities. Such voters could have:

1. become disengaged and apathetic and simply failed to vote;
2. voted for another established party;

3. voted for a new political party; or
4. divided their preferences among candidates of different parties.

Each of these options has some plausibility and each can be explored in the evidence which the election results provide. Footnote (1)

Option 1: Were there many voters who so lacked a firm attachment to any political party that they abstained from voting altogether in the face of what they perceived as non-compelling choices? The election data are unambiguous. In the 1992 election, voter turnout was as strong as in the elections of the preceding thirty years. 95.3 percent of the registered voters cast valid ballots and a mere 0.8 percent of the ballots cast were invalid. The election data for 1992, then, do not present the picture of a disengaged or dismissive electorate.

Option 2: A second option would have been to abandon their previous commitment to a political party and transfer it to its opponent. The increase of 8,211 votes for the PN from 1987 to 1992 and the net decrease of 25 MLP votes invites such an interpretation. The net changes in the parties' total votes are summarized in Table 1, showing that the PN and the Alternattiva achieved the most sizable gains.

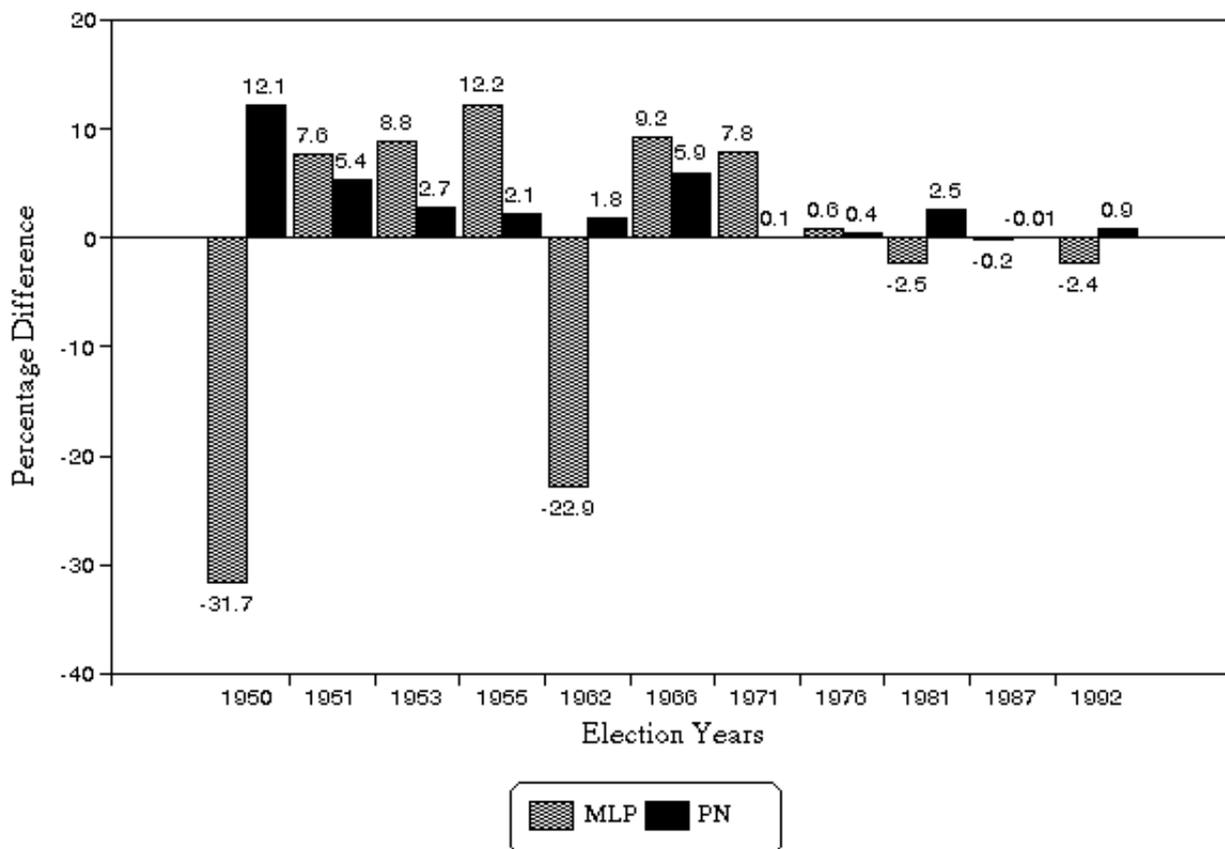
 Table 1: The Parties' Net Vote Gains and Losses
 from 1987 to 1992

MLP	-25
PN	8,211
Alternattiva	4,186
Communists.....	-119
Democratic Party	-380
Independents	98
 Total	 11,971

However, it is instructive to look not just at the numerical totals but to focus on the changing vote percentages that the parties obtained from one election to the next. Such fluctuations in the vote shares, as Figure 1 shows, were common and often substantial from 1950 to 1971, with the MLP shares of the national vote tending to be more volatile than those of the PN.

But the election of 1992, as the data presented in Figure 1 indicate, did not present a dramatic change in the parties' electoral fortunes. The MLP's share of the national vote decreased by 2.4% (from 48.9970 in 1987 to 46.5% in 1992) while the PN showed an increase of less than one percent. The MLP had a decrease not only in 1992 but also in the two preceding elections, and the "swing" in favour the PN was slightly more pronounced in 1981 than it was in 1992. The 1992 results thus do not indicate a sudden or dramatic shift in the overall percentages of the two major parties.

**Fig. 1: MLP and PN Shares of the National Vote:
Difference in Percentage Share From the Previous Election**



In any event, it is notoriously difficult to determine voter migrations among parties through the analysis of election data. It is by no means clear to what extent the net changes in vote totals were actually the consequence of voters changing their party identifications from one election to the next. To illustrate the difficulties: Between the elections of 1987 and 1992, there were approximately 13,000 deaths; and adding to this figure the net increase of 11,971 valid votes, there were about twenty-five thousand persons (one-tenth of the 1992 electorate) who voted for the first time in 1992 and, by definition, did not change parties. Footnote (2) Given the secrecy of the ballot and the continuing change in the composition of the electorate from one election to the next, election data are inevitably limited in revealing the movement of votes, within the continuing electorate, from one to another party.

What election data cannot reveal, public opinion surveys might. Survey research could shed light on voter migrations between parties, on the strength and duration of party identifications and a host of related matters. Unfortunately, there are no systematic and reliable survey data on voting intentions and behaviour available for Malta; if they should exist, they have not been made public. In their absence it is problematical to simply assert or assume that there was a sizable, unidirectional shift of voters from the MLP to the PN in 1992. Such a change of parties would surely represent for a voter something more than a merely marginal shift of loyalties, considering the long-standing and deep divisions between those two parties and, presumably, between their supporters. When one assumes the widespread occurrence of such dramatic switches it is reasonable to look for firm and persuasive evidence. Footnote (3)

Option 3: Another way to express abandonment of one's old party identification would have been, not by crossing the great divide between the PN and MLP, but by voting for a new political party or for independent candidates. This did not happen to any substantial extent in 1992. Minor parties have not fared well since the 1960s, and 1992 was hardly an exception to the trend. In 1992 there was a new party, the Alternattiva

Demokratika, which aggressively promoted itself. Yet its 1.7 percent of the valid votes and the usual dismal performance of independent candidates with their 110 votes demonstrate that abandonment of the major parties was not an option chosen by a significant number of voters. While a 1.7 percent vote share might conceivably affect the outcome of a very close election, it is by no means an indicator of a significant realignment of voter preferences.

Option 4: Finally, voters lacking an identification with any particular party might have been inclined to express preferences for candidates of more than one party, an option which the single-transferable-vote system makes easily available. The question, then, is whether there were many voters in 1992 who gave ballot preferences to candidates of different parties (something fairly plausible if they had only a weak loyalty to a party). An examination of this question should distinguish between two possibilities. First, to what extent did voters give a preference to candidates of another party when there still was a candidate of the same party to whom the voter gave his or her first or prior preference. This is a measure of what has been termed voters' "party solidarity." Second, to what extent did voters give a preference to candidates of another party (rather than have their vote become nontransferable) when no candidate of the party to whom they gave the first or prior preference remained available to receive transferred votes. This is a measure of voters' exclusivity. Footnote (4)

The question of how much "solidarity" and "exclusivity" the voters actually showed can be answered by examining all votes that were transferred, from elected or eliminated candidates, to candidates of either the same or of another party.

Table 2: "Solidarity" and "Exclusivity" of Alternattiva Voters

	% of Alternattiva Votes Transferred To Own Party	PN	MLP	% Non-Transfer
"Solidarity:" Another candidate of Alternattiva is there to receive transfers	58.40	19.89	18.91	2.80
"Exclusivity:" No Alternattiva candidate is there to receive transferred votes	--	41.07	28.80	30.14

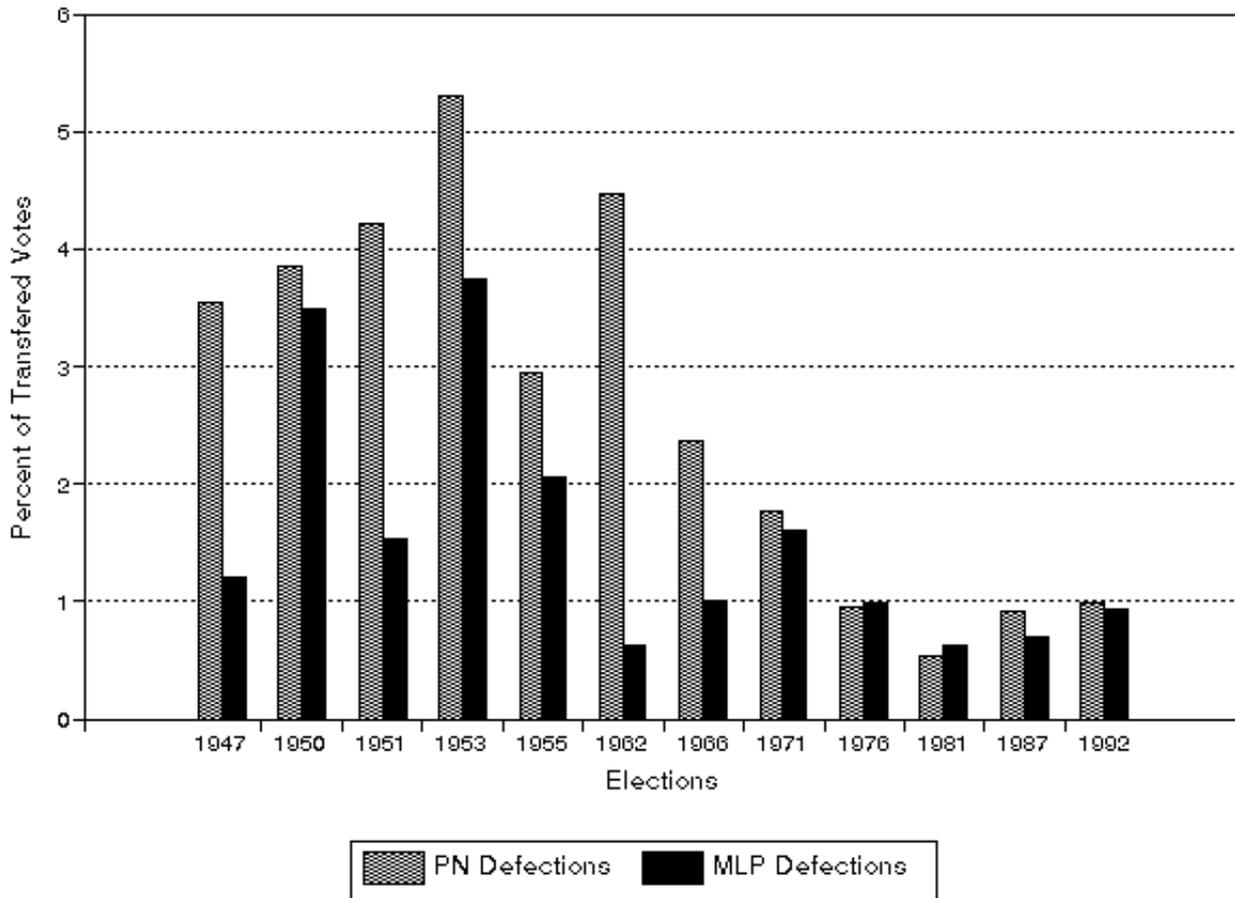
The supporters of the Alternattiva Demokratika provide a good example of a case where both "solidarity" and "exclusivity" are quite weak. Table 2 reveals that even when another Alternattiva candidate was still available to receive transfer votes, only 58.4% of such votes were transferred to him. Footnote (5)

When there was no candidate of their party remaining, over two-thirds of vote transfers (69.87%) went to candidates of other parties because most Alternattiva voters did not commit themselves exclusively to their party, which they could have done by making their vote nontransferable in this circumstance. This pattern of weak commitment to the party should not be surprising for a political party which was newly created, fielded few candidates and cultivated an appeal of independent-mindedness and nonconformity. But what of the "solidarity" and "exclusivity" of the vast majority of voters who gave their first preference to either the PN or the MLP?

Figure 2 shows the summary results of the "solidarity" of PN and MLP voters from 1947 to 1992, expressed in terms of the percentage of transfer votes that went to a candidate of another party, in those instances only

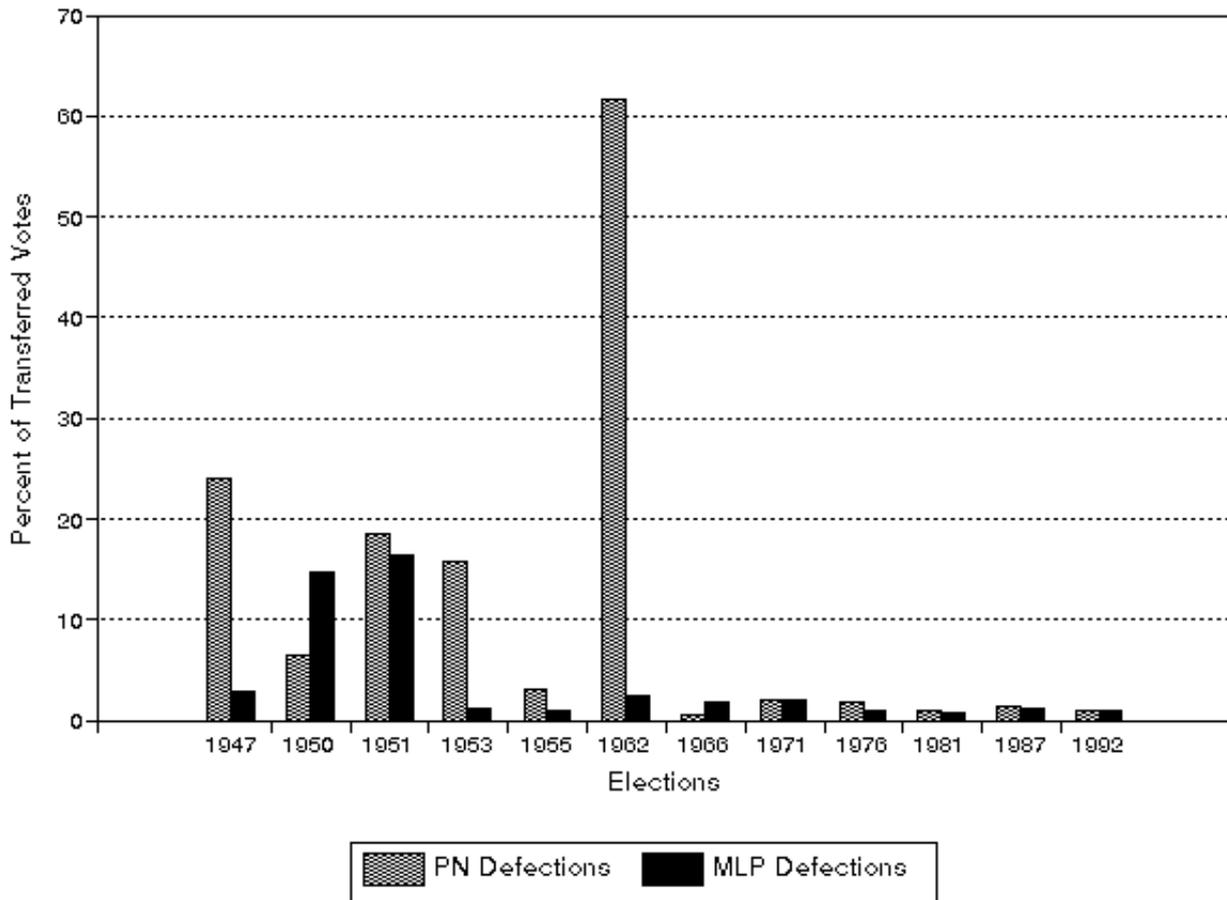
when there was still a candidate of the same party who could utilize them. The data in Figure 2 reveal that such crossparty preferences were more frequent in elections from 1947 to 1966; but even in those earlier elections the "defections" by PN and MLP voters only once exceeded 5%. Since 1976 such "defections" have become exceedingly few, hovering below the one percent level. In 1992 that pattern was maintained: Voters who gave their first preference to a major party candidate remained overwhelmingly loyal to that party. The defection rate was 0.99% for PN voters and 0.93% for MLP voters. In sum, for the vast majority of the voters, i.e., those supporting either the PN or the MLP, there was no weakening in the "solidarity" they maintained for their party's candidates the 1992 election.

Fig. 2: Party "Solidarity" of PN and MLP Voters



That leaves one last question: How "exclusive" was the support by supporters of the two major parties? If voters are determined not to have any of their preferences benefit a candidate of another party, even when their own party's candidates can make no use of them, they will make their vote nontransferable at this point and thus be "exclusive" in their party preference. Figure 3 presents the pattern of "exclusivity" for the two major parties from 1947 to 1992, showing the percentages of transferred votes which, when no candidate of the voter's party remained to receive them, were not made nontransferable but were given instead to candidates of other parties in this kind of situation was still fairly high. Those elections, it might be noted, had minor parties which were ideologically not far distant from a major party, such as the Boffa Labour Group or Herbert Ganado's DNP. But even during that period the defections from PN and MLP voters to other parties was usually well under 20%. (There is one exceptional case: The abnormally high percentage of PN votes shown in Figure 3 as being transferred in 1962 is mainly accounted for by the single transfer of a large number of votes from Gaetano Borg Olivier (PN) to Herbert Ganado of the DNP.)

Fig. 3: Party "Exclusivity" of PN and MLP Voters



In the recent elections, conducted in a highly competitive two-party setting, there is consistently impressive party loyalty of both PN and MLP voters. An examination of vote transfers in those cases where there were no more candidates of the voter's party left to receive them, shows that on average since 1966, PN voters made 98.7 percent of their votes nontransferable and MLP voters 98.8 percent; for the 1992 election, the percentages peaked at 99.0 and 99.2, respectively. PN and MLP voters, in short, showed with near-unanimity that they were unwilling to let their votes benefit candidates of another party.

Conclusion

In respect to vote transfers in both the "solidarity" and the "exclusivity" categories, the percentage of votes transferred to candidates of other parties in recent elections is so small that it can be termed trivial. Significantly, this trend showed no signs of changing in the 1992. As noted above, it is possible (but not demonstrable from the election data) that voters switched their support in 1992 to a party other than the one they had favoured in previous elections. But it is important to note that if they did make such a change in their first-preference vote they did not proceed to demonstrate a weak, faltering commitment to their new party choice; they stayed notably loyal to their newly preferred party, even when the ballot paper provided some opportunity to signal divided or weakened loyalty. Therefore, whatever changes in party identification may have occurred in 1992, the election data gives no evidence of weakened party identifications.

The preceding discussion has shown that the consensus view of a "growing strength of voters who did not identify themselves with any particular political party" is not supported by the election data. In the election of 1992 there is no pattern that sets it clearly apart from other recent elections, nor is there in any of the data an indication of the kind of seismic change which the consensus view suggests. Evidence from opinion survey

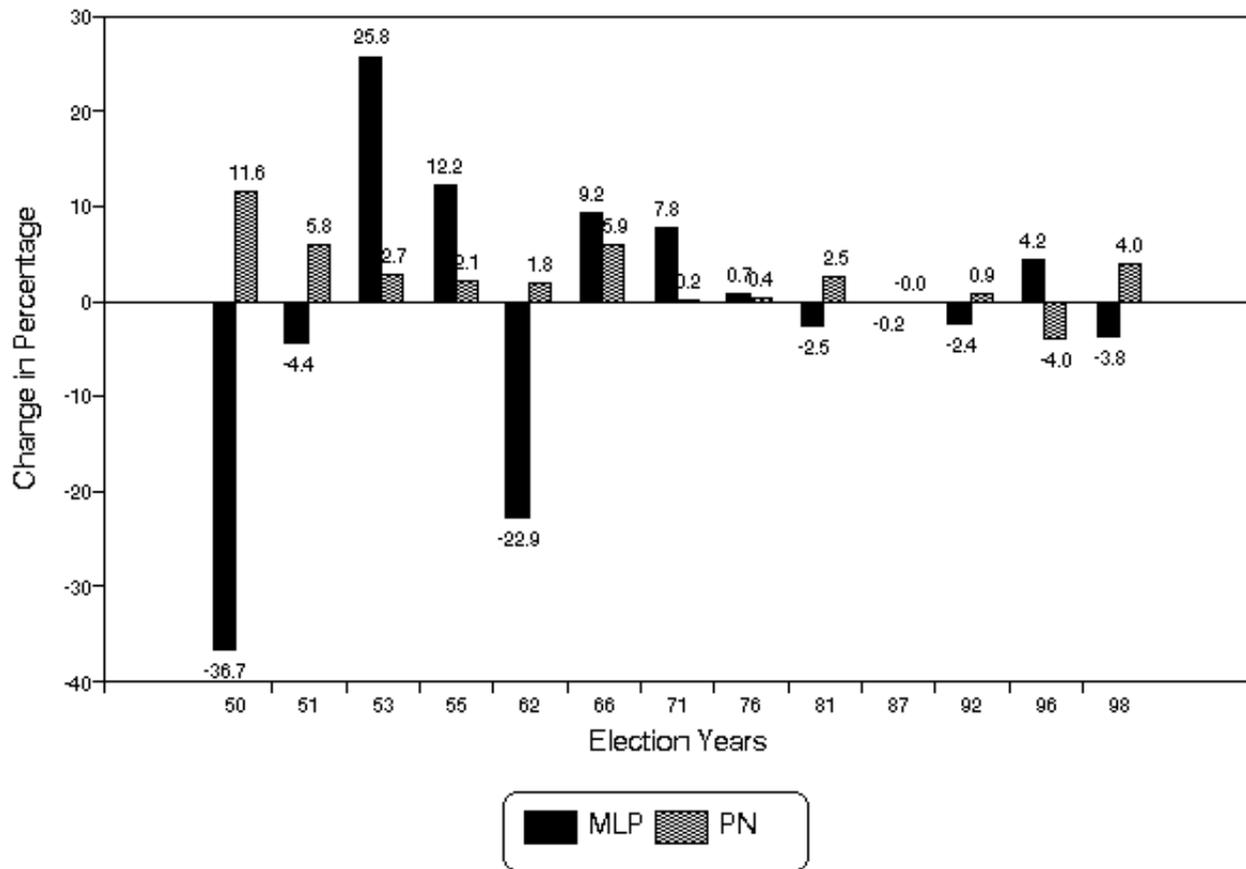
data could yet provide support for the consensus view, although such evidence would have to rely on what people said rather than, as with election data, on what they did. Until and unless such new evidence can be examined, the ancient Scottish verdict seems appropriate: Not Proven

Footnotes

1. The data for Maltese elections, including the number and destination of vote transfers on all counts, are available in machine-readable format in the author's database. The revised 1993 version of that database has been deposited for public access at the Library of the University of Malta and the National Library in Valletta. The computer analysis for this paper utilized that database.
2. The death statistic is based on data published in the 1992 edition of The Malta Yearbook.
3. Instead of assuming substantial switches of votes from the MLP to the PN in 1992 one could, for instance, entertain the hypothesis that the, 1992 gains of the PN were attributable to their garnering a disproportionate share of support from first-time voters. The problem of adequate evidence for such a hypothesis would be the same.
4. The use of these measures was pioneered by Michael Gallagher in his 1978 article on "Party Solidarity, Exclusivity and Inter-Party Relationships in Ireland, 1922 - 1977: The Evidence of Transfers," *Economic and Social Review* (vol. 10), pp. 1-22. It should be noted that, strictly speaking, one cannot be certain that votes transferred from the candidate of a particular party were actually given to a candidate of that same party on the first count because votes can conceivably have been transferred among candidates of different parties (and thus become "contaminated") on previous, intervening counts. The number and disposition of such earlier transfers could only be ascertained by an examination of individual ballot papers which is, of course, a practical impossibility. But given the pattern of strong party loyalties in Malta it is reasonable to ignore the issue in the analysis.
5. "Him" is used here because Alternattiva did not have any female candidates.

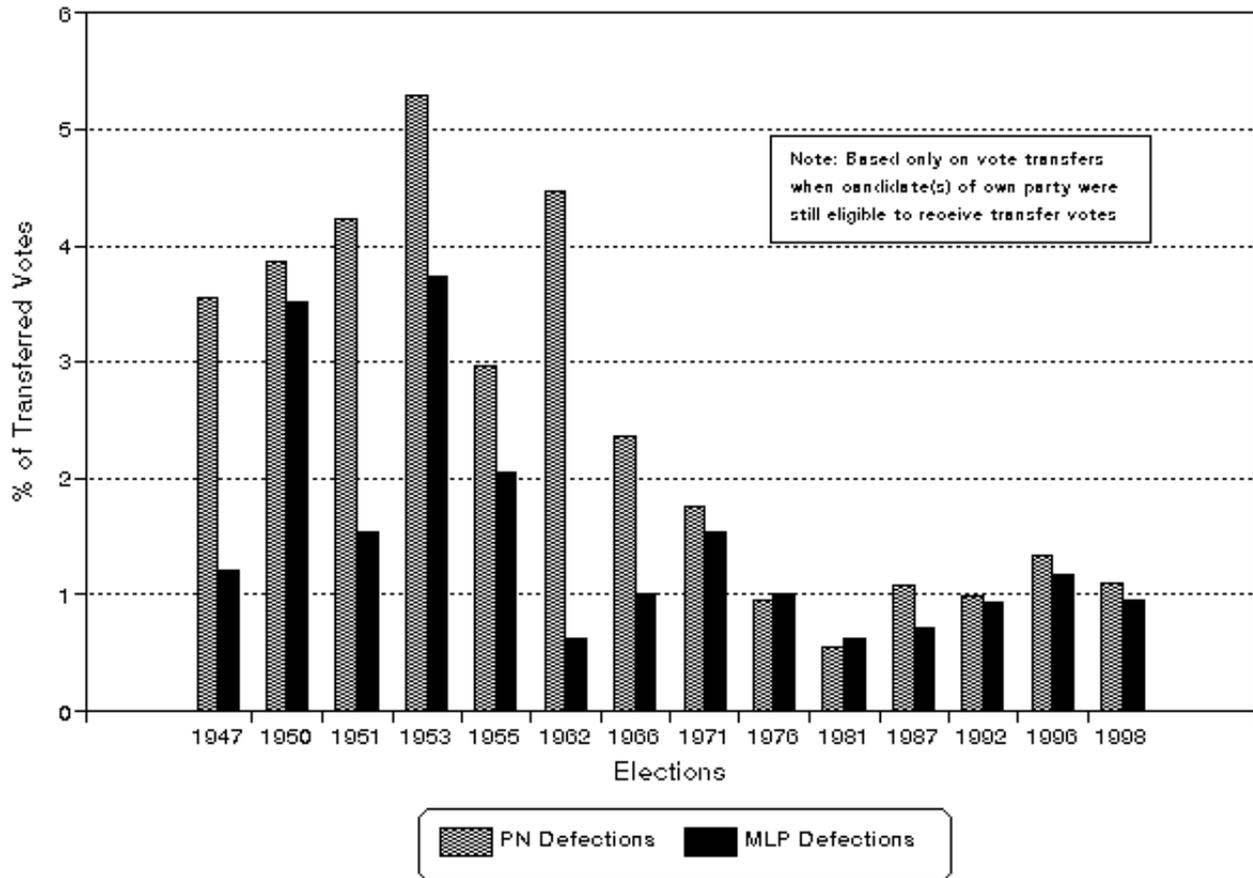
Here is an updated version of Table 1:

MLP and PN Shares of the National Vote: Percentage Change from Previous Election



Here is an updated version of Table 2:

Party Solidarity of MLP and PN Voters, 1947 - 1998:
 Defections to Candidate of Another Party, on Transfer Votes



Here is an updated version of Table 3:

Party "Exclusivity" of PN and MLP Voters, 1947 - 1998

