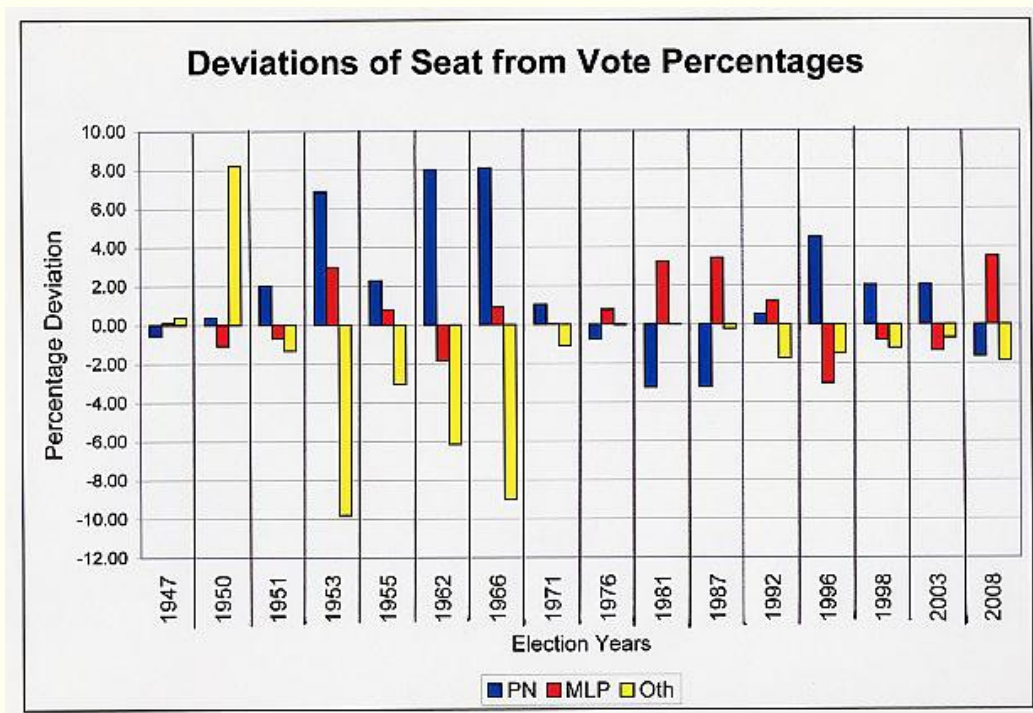


Disproportionality in Maltese Elections

An enduring problem in electoral systems is that of "disproportionality," i.e., the mismatch between a party's percentage of the popular vote and its percentage of legislative seats. Such disproportionality is quite common and extreme cases are easy to find in the real world. To give just one example, the Liberal Party in Britain polled 13.8% of the national vote in 1979 but was rewarded with only 1.7% of the seats in Parliament. The Conservatives, with 43.9% of the vote in the same election, received 53.4% of the seats and were able to form the Government.

Such percentage differences have not been as extreme in Malta because STV systems generally produce more proportional results. Nonetheless, disproportionality of some degree has always been a factor in Maltese elections.



The above graph summarizes the occasions and the degree to which parties either benefited or were disadvantaged by the process of converting votes into seats in general elections from 1947 to 2008. (The zero line in the graph represents perfect proportionality. Positive values indicate a party's obtaining a higher percentage of seats than its percentage of votes; negative values show the degree to which a party received a lower seat percentage compared to its vote percentage.)

In eleven of the sixteen elections the PN obtained a disproportionately positive result, i.e., its seat percentage was greater than its vote percentage. The same is true for the MLP in nine of the elections. Three of the cases (1953, 1962 and 1966) show a deviation of more than six percent in favor of the PN.

It is less common for the major parties to suffer a negative result, i.e., their seat percentage falling below their vote percentage. This is the case because electoral systems generally tend

to favor the larger parties in the allocation of seats and, in Malta, a constituency size of five seats is a barrier to the success of small political parties whose electoral support is not concentrated in particular districts.

There are, however, four remarkable instances of a major party suffering a substantial (more than two percent) loss in its percentage of seats compared to their percentage of the vote: 1981, 1987, 1996 and 2008. In each of the four cases the difference was substantial enough so that the party with a majority of the votes failed to obtain a majority of the seats. This outcome in 1981 led to a constitutional crisis.

A constitutional amendment was adopted in 1987 to avert a repetition of such a result, by giving a party with a majority of the first-count votes a sufficient number of "bonus" seats to assure it of a majority of parliamentary seats. In 1987, 1996 and 2008 the provisions of this amendment were applied, giving four additional seats to the PN in 1987 and 2008 and to the MLP in 1996.

The above graph also illustrates the fact that for the small parties in Malta, disproportionality almost always entails a penalty. In many cases they receive no seats at all, even in the case of the Christian Workers Party which had obtained six percent of the national vote in 1966.

In recent years, the *Alternattiva Demokratika* has continued the small parties' saga of frustration. To be sure, there are a few exceptional cases of minor parties where their seat percentage exceeds the vote percentage, such as the Gozo and Jones parties in 1947 when they competed in only one electoral district. But the general rule is that the minor parties will lose in the translation of votes into seats and the major parties will gain.

Another way to illustrate the disproportionality in Maltese elections is to note the number of seats which were actually awarded to political parties and to compare these to an "ideal" number of seats -- those which they would have won if their respective vote percentages had been perfectly mirrored in the number of their parliamentary seats.

The Table below provides this illustration. It reveals some remarkable deviations from perfect proportionality, such as the PN gains at the expense of smaller parties in 1953, 1962 and 1966 and the deprivation of *Alternattiva Demokratika* of a seat in 1992 and 1996.

Years	Actual Number of Seats Won				"Ideal" Number of Seats			Resulting Discrepancies		
	PN	MLP	Oth	All	PN	MLP	Oth	PN	MLP	Oth
1947	7	24	9	40	7.22	23.94	8.84	-0.22	0.06	0.16
1950	12	11	17	40	11.85	11.43	16.72	0.15	-0.43	0.28
1951	15	14	11	40	14.19	14.28	11.53	0.81	-0.28	-0.53
1953	18	19	3	40	15.26	17.82	6.92	2.74	1.18	-3.92
1955	17	23	0	40	16.08	22.69	1.22	0.92	0.31	-1.22
1962	25	16	9	50	21.00	16.92	12.07	4.00	-0.92	-3.07
1966	28	22	0	50	23.95	21.55	4.51	4.05	0.45	-4.51
1971	27	28	0	55	26.43	27.96	0.61	0.57	0.04	-0.61
1976	31	34	0	65	31.50	33.49	0.01	-0.50	0.51	-0.01
1981	31	34	0	65	33.10	31.90	0.01	-2.10	2.10	-0.01
1987	31	34	0	65	33.09	31.77	0.14	-2.09	2.23	-0.14
1992	34	31	0	65	33.65	30.22	1.13	0.35	0.78	-1.13
1996	34	31	0	65	31.07	32.97	0.96	2.93	-1.97	-0.96
1998	35	30	0	65	33.68	30.53	0.80	1.32	-0.53	-0.80
2003	35	30	0	65	33.67	30.88	0.45	1.33	-0.88	-0.45
2008	31	34	0	65	32.07	31.72	1.22	-1.07	2.28	-1.22

After the award of bonus seats:

1987	35	34	0	69	35.13	33.72	0.15	-0.13	0.28	-0.15
1996	34	35	0	69	32.98	35.00	1.02	1.02	0.00	-1.02
2008	35	34	0	69	34.04	33.67	1.29	0.96	0.33	-1.29

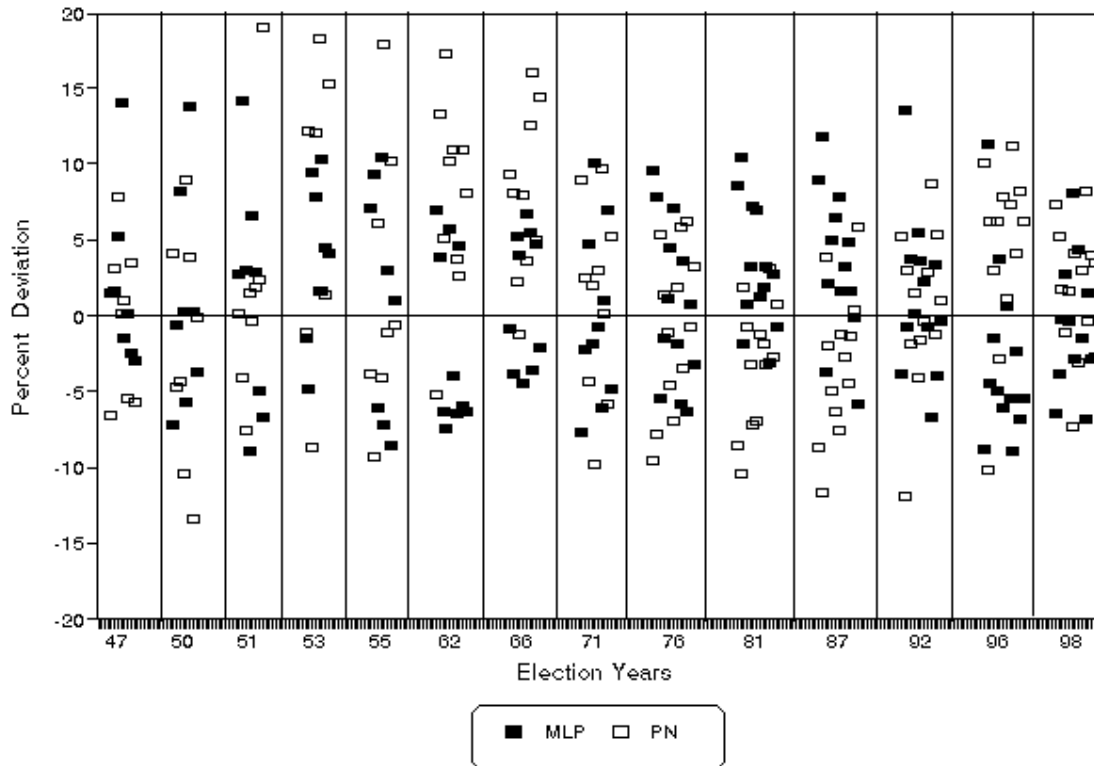
The "corrections" with bonus seats in 1987, 1996 and 2008 did enable the party with a majority of the votes to obtain the barest majority of parliamentary seats. However, they did not create a particularly proportionate result. A truly proportionate result would have given the *Alternattiva Demokratika* one of the 69 parliamentary seats in 1996 (and, indeed, of the 65 original seats).

At the District Level: The full extent of disproportionality is somewhat obscured by the data presented above, because it gives only nation-wide results. At the district level, disproportionality can be dramatic. But the greater disparities in the separate districts have tended to cancel each other out, although that is not an inevitable result. The graph below shows the deviations at the district level and demonstrates a strong and persistent pattern of disproportionality.

The discrepancies began to cluster a little more around the (ideal) zero level by 1971, yet continue to exceed five percent on average. The gaps can be substantial: For example, in 2008 the PN obtained 32% of the vote in the Second District but garnered only 20% of the seats. With district sizes limited to five seats this is not surprising, as the two major parties usually divide the seats in a 3:2 ratio and vote totals never quite produce a corresponding 60% to 40% ratio.

The graph below does not cover the two most recent elections, for technical reasons. But the pattern shown in the graph did not change significantly in 2003 or 2008.

Deviations of Seat from Vote Percentages: PN and MLP, by District, 1947 - 1998



Those who are troubled by these disparities between vote shares and seat shares may ask what remedies are available. The answer is: Probably very few. The major parties who are the beneficiaries of the current system will be reluctant to surrender their advantage. Moreover, the search for near-perfect proportionality is not likely to encounter an alternative electoral system without defects of its own. Still, there has been an ingenious [proposal by Prof. Buhagiar](#) of the University of Malta that would maintain the STV ballot structure while increasing the proportionality of results.