

The Discrepancy Between Analyses of the Electoral Register and Actual Election Results in Londonderry and Omagh in the 1960s

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The Cameron Report presented an analysis of the electoral register in the Londonderry County Borough (the Londonderry Corporation area) outlining “the extraordinary situation in 1967” as follows: ¹

Table 1 The Cameron Report Analysis of the Londonderry County Borough Electoral Register 1967

	Catholic Voters	Other Voters	Seats
North Ward	2530	3946	8 Unionists
Waterside Ward	1852	3697	4 Unionists
South Ward	10047	1138	8 Non-Unionists
Total	14429	8781	20

The “Other Voters” were Protestants, and the “Non-Unionists” were members of the Nationalist Party, which was supported almost exclusively by Catholics. On the basis of such analyses of electoral registers, the Cameron Report concluded that there were “ward areas in which Unionist representatives were returned by small majorities, whereas Non-Unionist representatives were returned by very large majorities” ².

Any reasonable person would conclude that as 1967 was a year in which local government elections had taken place, the Cameron Commission had examined actual election results and found them to be what would be expected by an analysis of electoral registers. In fact, the Commission had done no such thing. It had, in effect, reasoned as follows: Catholics are in a large majority in certain wards and hence Catholic parties must have won large majorities at the polls. It turned out to be a startling example of invalid reasoning.

In 1967, the Londonderry Corporation aldermen’s seats were uncontested. This meant there was just an election for councillors, 6 in the North Ward, 3 in the Waterside Ward, and 6 in the South Ward. As had been the case since 1936, Unionists and Nationalist declined to put up candidates in wards where they did not expect to win ³. Thus, as usual, there were no Unionist-Nationalist contests. Each party did, however, face opposition from the Northern Ireland Labour Party which, since 1949, had committed itself to support the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland ⁴. It could probably be described as unionist with a small “u”, certainly not Nationalist, but clearly an opponent of the Unionist government in Northern Ireland.

These elections pre-dated the Single Transferable Vote. Each elector could mark an X against up to 6 candidates in the North and South Wards, and up to 3 candidates in the Waterside Ward. In the case of the two biggest wards, it could be said to have been a first-six-past-the-post election. The number of votes cast would therefore have been greater than the number of voters. The total votes cast for each party in 1967 were as follows ⁵:

Nationalist Party	26880
Unionist Party	25535
NI Labour Party	25296
Independents	1461

The Independents were liberal Unionists, standing in the North and Waterside Wards. These figures alone show that there was something wrong with the Cameron Commission's reasoning, but a series of metrics can be applied to bring out the discrepancy between an analysis of the electoral register and the actual election results. In the case of the Londonderry Corporation, discussion has to be restricted to the 1967 results because, apart from one by-election, there had previously been no contested local elections in the borough since 1949.

The first metric to be applied is that of the Inter-Party Gap. Not all candidates of the same party received the same number of votes. Some were more popular than others. However all the Unionist candidates in the North and Waterside Wards each received more votes than all of the Labour candidates. All the Unionists were elected. Similarly with the Nationalist Party in the South Ward. One measure of the dominance of the victorious party is the gap between its candidate with the lowest vote, and the Labour candidate with the highest vote in a particular ward.

Table 2 Londonderry County Borough Elections 1967: Inter-Party Gap ⁶

	Bottom Un/Nat Candidate	Top NI Labour Candidate	Difference (Inter-Party Gap)	Total Poll	Difference as % of poll
North Ward	(Un) 2768	1434	1334	4648	28.7
Waterside Ward	(Un) 2740	1116	1624	4128	39.3
South Ward	(Nat) 4282	2701	1581	7487	21.1

By examining the Inter-Party Gap, the Cameron Report's claim that there were, in Londonderry, "ward areas in which Unionist representatives were returned by small majorities, whereas Non-Unionist representatives were returned by very large majorities" can be re-assessed. In numerical terms, the Inter-Party Gap is not significantly different in the Unionist and Nationalist wards. When the gap is treated as a percentage of the total poll, to take account of different numbers of votes cast in each ward, it can be seen that the gap over Labour is smaller in the Catholic South Ward.

In the next table, the vote of the top candidate of the victorious party is compared with that of the top candidate of the Labour Party in each ward.

Table 3 Londonderry County Borough Elections 1967: Top Candidates Compared ⁷

	Top Un/Nat Candidate	Top NI Labour Candidate	Difference	Total Poll	Difference as % of poll
North Ward	(Un) 2908	1434	1474	4648	31.7
Waterside Ward	(Un) 2834	1116	1718	4128	41.6
South Ward	(Nat) 4692	2701	1991	7487	26.6

Comparing the top candidates changes the picture very little. The Nationalist Party's majority is marginally bigger than that achieved by Unionists in numerical terms, but lower when expressed as a percentage of the total poll. It is possible, however, to build on these figures to calculate what I refer to as the Cameron Credibility Gap. This calculation shows how good each party was in fulfilling its religious potential. In other words, if Catholics were assumed by Cameron to vote Nationalist, and Protestants to vote Unionist, just how far was that true? To the extent that it is not true, there is a credibility gap between the Cameron Commission's assumptions and actual election results.

In this table there is a comparison between the majority which the Cameron Report led readers to expect in each ward based on an analysis of the electoral register (the Cameron Paper Majority) and the actual majority (calculated as the difference between the vote of the top candidate of the successful party and the top Labour candidate). A Cameron Credibility Gap figure that is positive indicates that a party did better than an examination of the electoral register would suggest. A negative figure indicates that it did worse.

Table 4 Londonderry County Borough Elections 1967: The Cameron Credibility Gap ⁸

	Caths	Prots	Cameron Paper Majority	Actual Majority	Cameron Gap
North Ward	2530	3946	1416	1474	+58
Waterside Ward	1832	3697	1865	1718	-147
South Ward	10047	1138	8909	1991	-6918

The figures in the right hand column for the North and Waterside Wards are very low, indicating that Protestants voted Unionist in pretty much the way the Cameron Report expected. However, there is a huge Cameron Credibility Gap in the Catholic South Ward. Catholics did not vote Nationalist in the way that the Cameron Report led generations of readers to expect.

There is one further metric which can be applied to Londonderry's election results which brings out even more clearly the way each party was able to fulfil its religious potential. In Table 5 a party which attracts the support of x% of the community from which it largely draws its support on a similar x% turnout is assumed to be getting solid support and maximising its religious potential. Thus, if 60% of Catholics voted for the top Nationalist candidate on a 60% turnout, that would be considered good. Put slightly differently, if the turnout is 60%, a party should be pleased if 60% of its community votes for the party. The Religious Potential figure is taken from the Cameron Report and represents the number of Protestant or Catholic voters (as indicated) in each ward.

Table 5 Londonderry County Borough Elections 1967: Religious Potential ⁹

	Top Un/Nat Candidate	Religious Potential	% of Religious Potential	% Turnout
North Ward	(Un) 2908	(Prots) 3946	73.7	71.7
Waterside Ward	(Un) 2834	(Prots) 3697	76.7	74.3
South Ward	(Nat) 4692	(Caths) 10047	46.7	66.3

It can be seen that in the North and Waterside Wards the figures in the two right-hand columns are very close to each other, indicating that the Unionist Party received solid support from the Protestant community. On the other hand, there is a big difference in the South Ward. There seemed to be a lower turnout of Catholics, and there was a very significant leakage or defection of Catholic votes to the Labour Party. Some 36% of those who went to the polls in the South Ward voted for the most popular Labour candidate.

Almost all Nationalist Party voters were Catholics, but not all Catholics were Nationalist voters. This should not be surprising. In his 1968 Loyalty Survey of 1500 households in Northern Ireland¹⁰, Professor Richard Rose of Strathclyde University found that only 51% of Catholics supported Nationalist candidates (such as the Nationalist Party and Republican Labour). A further 27% said they identified with the Northern Ireland Labour Party, and 5% were Unionists¹¹. If the 11% of Catholics who said they had no party affiliation or answered “Don’t Know” are eliminated, then still only 58% of Catholics with a definite affiliation said they supported Nationalist parties¹².

The leakage or defection of Protestant votes to the Labour Party was not unknown in the 1960s. However, it was not a feature of the more finely balanced councils in the West of Ulster which were the subject of criticism by the Cameron Report. It was more characteristic of councils like the Belfast Corporation, where Unionist control was never in doubt. In 1964, Labour councillors and an alderman were elected for the Court Ward, covering part of the Protestant Shankill Road.¹³

Omagh Urban District Council

Omagh was one of those councils criticised in the Cameron Report on the basis of a religious analysis of the electoral register¹⁴. It provides a further example of the discrepancy between such an analysis and actual election results.

There is no published Cameron Report analysis of the Omagh Urban District Council electoral register in 1967, but use can be made of the figures supplied by the Catholic pressure group, the Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ), published in 1969. The CSJ provided a religious breakdown for each of the three Omagh Urban District wards¹⁵.

The method to be used here is to take the percentages of Catholics and Protestants in each ward provided by the CSJ in 1969 and to assume that they hold good for the Omagh local elections held in 1964 and 1967. There are two reasons why this would seem to be a reasonable assumption. The official electorate in the contested Catholic West Ward in 1967 was 2143¹⁶. The CSJ estimate in 1969 was 2128¹⁷. This suggests that there was very little change between 1967 and 1969. The CSJ figures have therefore been used to estimate the number of Protestant and Catholic voters in 1967.

The second reason is that there is evidence of a very stable religious composition to the Omagh local government electorate over time. Figures provided by the Nationalist MP for West Tyrone, Alexander Donnelly, in 1934, suggest that 58.6% of Omagh local government voters were Catholic¹⁸. The CSJ figure for 1969 is 57.3%¹⁹. It is therefore reasonable to apply the CSJ religious composition percentages for Omagh in analyses of the local election results in 1964 and 1967, expecting the religious balance to have changed little. Using this method, the 1964 Omagh figures look like this:

Table 6 Campaign for Social Justice Analysis of the Omagh Urban District Electoral Register

	Catholics 1969 (CSJ figures)	Catholics 1964 (Estimated using CSJ percentages)	Protestants 1964 (Estimated using CSJ percentages)
North Ward	315 (28.9%)	294 (28.9%)	722 (71.1%)
South Ward	473 (40.0%)	380 (40.0%)	570 (60.0%)
West Ward	1759 (82.7%)	1447 (82.7%)	303 (17.3%)
Total	2547 (57.9%)	2121(57.9%)	1595 (42.1%)

In 1967, the Unionist North and South Wards were not contested in Omagh. In the Catholic West Ward, the Nationalist Party was challenged by five members of the Northern Ireland Labour Party and one member of the Republican Labour Party (then led by Gerry Fitt) ²⁰. The situation was complicated slightly by Unionist tactical voting. The *Tyrone Constitution*, Omagh’s Unionist weekly paper, wrote this just before the election.

“Unionist candidates who have been returned unopposed are certain to take more than a mere passing interest in the election, because those elected will be their colleagues at the meetings in the Town Hall for the next three years and, as the Nationalist representatives of the past have been reasonably co-operative, it naturally follows that they would prefer members that they know to members that they know little or nothing about....The Unionist Local Government vote in the West Ward is about 350, or about one-sixth of the total, and should these come out to support the Nationalist Party their votes could prove a determining factor in the contest.” ²¹

After the election, the Republican Labour Party candidate complained to the *Ulster Herald*, “The Nationalists were claiming a victory, but they owed that victory to the fact that over 300 Unionist voters in the West Ward had come out in support of the Nationalist candidates.” ²²

The number of Unionist tactical voters may well be exaggerated, so for the purposes of this article it has been assumed that 100 Protestants voted Nationalist. This, of course, reduces the number of Nationalist voters who can be assumed to be Catholic. The assumption has been applied only to Table 13.

The following tables present a similar analysis to that carried out for Londonderry. Recall that in 1967, only the West Ward saw a contested election. In 1964, Northern Ireland Labour candidates contested all three wards in the Omagh Urban District, but there were, as usual, no Unionist-Nationalist confrontations.

Table 7 Omagh Urban District Elections 1967: Inter-Party Gap ²³

	Bottom Nat Candidate	Top NI Labour Candidate	Difference (Inter-Party Gap)	Total Poll	Difference as % of poll
West Ward	823	721	102	1564	6.5

Table 8 Omagh Urban District Elections 1964: Inter-Party Gap²⁴

	Bottom Un/Nat Candidate	Top NI Labour Candidate	Difference (Inter-Party Gap)	Total Poll	Difference as % of poll
North Ward	(Un) 485	170	315	720	43.8
South Ward	(Un) 540	155	385	750	51.3
West Ward	(Nat) 680	662	18	1437	1.3

It can be seen in Tables 7 and 8 that the Inter-Party Gap is much bigger, in numerical terms, in the Unionist wards. When the gap is expressed as a percentage of the total poll, the difference is quite dramatic. The figures support the conclusion that was reached in respect of Londonderry. Catholic votes were much more likely to leak to Labour candidates.

Table 9 Omagh Urban District Elections 1967: Top Candidates Compared²⁵

	Top Nat Candidate	Top NI Labour Candidate	Difference	Total Poll	Difference as % of poll
West Ward	1101	823	278	1564	17.8

Table 10 Omagh Urban District Elections 1964: Top Candidates Compared²⁶

	Top Un/Nat Candidate	Top NI Labour Candidate	Difference	Total Poll	Difference as % of poll
North Ward	(Un) 553	170	383	720	53.2
South Ward	(Un) 613	155	458	750	61.0
West Ward	(Nat) 953	662	291	1437	20.3

Tables 9 and 10 present a slightly more encouraging picture for the Nationalist Party, but the gap between the top Unionist candidate and the Labour representative with the most votes is very significantly greater, expressed as a percentage of the total poll, than that between the Nationalist and Labour leading candidates in the West Ward. The result in the South Ward is noteworthy in that 613 out of 750 voters (81.7%) supported the most successful Unionist candidate.

Table 11 Omagh Urban District Elections 1967: The Cameron Credibility Gap²⁷

	Caths	Prots	Cameron Paper Majority	Actual Majority	Cameron Gap
West Ward	1759	369	1390	278	-1112

Table 12 Omagh Urban District Elections 1964: The Cameron Credibility Gap²⁸

	Caths	Prots	Cameron Paper Majority	Actual Majority	Cameron Gap
North Ward	294	722	428	383	-45
South Ward	380	570	190	458	+268
West Ward	1447	303	1144	291	-853

Tables 11 and 12 mirror the situation in Londonderry. The Cameron Credibility Gap is very large in the Catholic West Ward. The actual votes won by the Nationalist Party are much less than would be expected by an analysis of the electoral register. Unionists, on the other hand, commanded very loyal support from the Protestant electorate.

In the following table the figures have been shown with and without the assumption that 100 Protestants voted for the top Nationalist candidate in 1967. If 100 Protestants voted in this way, then only 1001 of the 1101 Nationalist voters were Catholic.

Table 13 Omagh Urban District Elections 1967: Religious Potential²⁹

	Top Nat Candidate	Religious Potential	% of Religious Potential	% Turnout
West Ward	1101	1759	62.6	73.0
West Ward (adjusted)	1001	1759	56.9	73.0

Table 14 Omagh Urban District Elections 1964: Religious Potential³⁰

	Top Un/Nat Candidate	Religious Potential (Estimated using CSJ percentages)	% of Religious Potential	% Turnout
North Ward	(Un) 553	(Prots) 722	76.6	70.1
South Ward	(Un) 613	(Prots) 570	107.5	78.9
West Ward	(Nat) 953	(Caths) 1447	65.9	82.1

Comparing the last two columns in Table 14, it can be seen that on an 82.1% turnout, the Nationalist Party could attract the support of only 65.9% of Catholics in the West Ward. Unionists did very much better in attracting solid Protestant support in the other two wards. The South Ward figures suggest one or more of the following explanations: The CSJ made a slight underestimate of the percentage of Protestants in this ward; there was an exceptionally high Protestant turnout; or some Catholics voted Unionist, whether for tactical reasons or otherwise.

Conclusions

The Cameron Credibility Gap. Politically, perhaps the most telling metric is the Cameron Credibility Gap. Long before Cameron made reference to analyses of electoral registers, Nationalists and civil rights activists had presented such analyses to create an impression that there were “ward areas in which Unionist representatives were returned by small majorities, whereas Non-Unionist representatives were returned by very large majorities”. It was, however, the Cameron Report which gave the argument a veneer of respectability.

It retained a modicum of credibility only so long as its proponents could persuade academics and researchers not to look at any actual local government election results. For the most part, the political activists were successful in doing this.

The arguments about religious analyses of electoral registers are largely impressionistic. They give the impression of a large majority without actually providing any concrete electoral evidence. They are emotional rather than rational. Certainly they have given the impression that Nationalists had a majority of 8909 in Londonderry’s South Ward in 1967 (Table 1). It has now been revealed that the real-world electoral majority, even with no Unionist opposition, was actually just 1991 (Table 3).

Similarly in the Omagh Urban District, the analysers of electoral registers gave the impression that Nationalists in the West Ward had a majority of 1390 in 1967 (Table 11). The actual electoral majorities were 291 in 1964 (Table 12), and 278 in 1967 (Table 11).

Inter-Party Gap and the Top Candidate Comparisons. The evidence provided by actual local government election results does not support the proposition that there were “ward areas in which Unionist representatives were returned by small majorities, whereas Non-Unionist representatives were returned by very large majorities”. The majorities in the Londonderry Unionist wards were, in numerical terms, only marginally smaller than in the Catholic South Ward. When such majorities are expressed as a percentage of the total poll, the Unionist majorities are greater (Tables 2 and 3).

In Omagh, the Unionist numerical majorities, and majorities expressed as a percentage of the total poll, are all greater than those in the Nationalist West Ward (Tables 7, 8, 9 and 10).

The Religious Potential Argument. If it is accepted that a vote equivalent to a 60% Nationalist share of the Catholic electorate on a 60% turnout represents solid Catholic support for Nationalism, then it must be concluded that Nationalism fell well short of this target. Unionists in Londonderry and Omagh were very good at maximising their potential vote in the Protestant community. Their vote, expressed as a percentage of the Protestant population, was consistently larger than the percentage turnout figure, ranging from 2.0% greater in Londonderry’s North Ward to 28.6% in Omagh’s South Ward. That represents solid Protestant support for Unionism (Tables 5 and 14).

Nationalists’ share of the Catholic vote, on the other hand, consistently fell short of the turnout figure, indicating that many Catholics did not support the Nationalist candidates. In Londonderry’s South Ward, this shortfall was 19.6%. In Omagh’s West Ward, the equivalent shortfall was 16.2% in 1964, and 10.4% (unadjusted for Unionist tactical voting) or 16.1% (adjusted) in 1967. That represents a very significant leakage or defection of Catholic voters to the Northern Ireland Labour Party (Tables 5, 13 and 14).

Postscript: The Local Elections of 1973

The fact that Nationalist support among Catholics was overestimated is borne out by the 1973 local government election results. These were held under a universal adult suffrage (with a

voting age reduced to 18), for new councils with new ward boundaries, and representatives were elected by the Single Transferable Vote (STV) method of proportional representation.

In Londonderry, an extended boundary was provided by the reorganisation of local government. Boundary extension had been a key demand of most Nationalist politicians. Overoptimistic projections had led some commentators to expect a significant Nationalist majority on the new Londonderry City Council (later to be renamed Derry City Council). In fact the Unionists, fighting under the banner of the United Loyalist Group, were the biggest party in three of the five wards, and would have won the most seats under a first-past-the-post election. Even with proportional representation, which the rest of the United Kingdom would not accept, Nationalists won only 14 of the 27 seats, made up of SDLP, Nationalist Party and Republican Clubs representatives.³¹

In Omagh, the fairest comparison is with the district electoral area of the new Omagh District Council known as Omagh Town (Area C). Here Nationalists won only three of the seven seats with a 41% share of the first preference votes in 1973³². It was not until 1985 that Nationalists won a majority on the wider Omagh District Council, and a fourth Nationalist seat in Omagh Town was not secured at the polls until 1989.³³

By pointing to analyses of electoral registers in the 1960s, civil rights activists claimed for Nationalism a degree of support among Catholics which it simply did not have.

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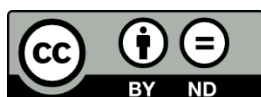
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