

Iceland: Recent Althingi Elections

The Icelandic legislature, the Althingi, is composed of sixty members who are elected in eight constituencies for a term of four years. Five constituencies elect five M. A.s (Members of the Althingi) each, two constituencies elect six each, and Reykjavik, the capital, elects twelve. The remaining eleven seats are distributed so as to achieve greater proportionality. They are given to the parties on a basis of having the highest average ratios of voters to constituency-elected M.A.s. Since the eleven additional members are only distributed to parties which have obtained at least one constituency-elected member a considerable threshold is created for the Althingi membership. Since 1959 this threshold has ranged from 2300 to 3000 votes in Reykjavik or from 600 to 2300 votes in the other constituencies.¹ In all the constituencies the results are decided by the d'Hondt proportional method.

During the present century the Icelandic electoral system has been subjected to three fundamental changes and a few minor ones. It started out as a system dominated by single-member constituencies and simple majority elections. An increased membership for the capital and partial introduction of proportional representation marked the most significant stages of alteration until the present system was enacted. Only three elections have taken place under this system: in 1959, 1963, and 1967. Four parties participated in them all, the fifth disintegrating after its 1959 defeat. These parties were:

The Independence Party (IP). It was established in 1929 when the Liberal and Conservative Parties were amalgamated. The IP has ever since been the largest party in Iceland. In internal affairs its policies have in general developed in ways similar to the liberal-conservative outlooks in Scandinavia. In foreign policy the IP in recent decades has been the strongest supporter of NATO and the US military presence in Iceland.

The Progressive Party (PP). It was founded in 1916 by the leaders of the agricultural bloc in the Althingi and the dominant figures in the Co-operative Movement. The party has remained the main political instrument of these two sectors. Since World War II, however, it has gained a stronghold in urban areas, becoming in recent years the largest or the second largest party in a number of towns. While maintaining a pro-NATO position, the PP has at times been very critical of the US base in Iceland, on two occasions even going so far as to demand its removal.

The Social Democratic Party (SDP). Like the PP it was established in 1916, a product of a similar increase in class consciousness. Due partly to two major splits the SDP in Iceland has failed to reach the same dominance as similar parties in other Scandinavian countries. The party has gradually lost its doctrinaire socialist characteristics, the priority given to nationalization having been formally abolished a few years ago. The SDP has consistently been in favour of NATO, but once, for a brief period, it withdrew its support for the US base.

The People's Alliance (PA). It was founded in 1956 when the United Socialist Party (USP) and a splinter group from the SDP joined hands, the USP having been formed in 1938 by a similar amalgamation of the Communist Party and another splinter group from the SDP. Since 1956 the PA has been the most radical left-wing force in Icelandic politics. It has advocated economic planning and nationalization and has supported trade union demands very strongly. The PA has furthermore attempted to rally together the opponents of NATO and the US base.

The National Preservation Party (NPP). This party was founded in the early 1950s by nationalist but non-socialist opponents of the US base. The removal of the base and the re-establishment of Iceland's neutrality were the most fundamental components of its policy. In the 1953 election the NPP succeeded in obtaining two seats in the Althingi. These seats were lost, however, in 1956 when the PP and SDP temporarily decided to oppose the US military presence. When the NPP in 1959 again failed to get a seat in the Althingi, the party's cohesion started to decline. By 1963 most of its leaders had joined the PA.

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Table I. Election results; votes

Constituencies/Elections	IP		PP		SDP		PA		NPP		Participation		
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4a)	(4b)
Reykjavik													
1959	16474	46.6	4100	11.6	5946	16.8	6543	18.5	2247	6.4	40028	35799	89.4
1963	19122	50.7	6178	16.4	5730	15.2	6678	17.7			42251	38340	90.7
1967	17510	42.9	6829	16.7	7138	17.5	8943	21.9			45419	41525	91.4
West													
1959	2123	35.5	2236	37.4	926	15.5	686	11.5			6509	6068	93.2
1963	2019	33.5	2363	39.2	912	15.1	739	12.2			6630	6146	92.7
1967	2077	33.2	2381	38.0	977	15.6	827	13.2			6901	6381	92.5
Western-Peninsula													
1959	1957	38.5	1744	34.6	680	13.5	658	13.0			5710	5136	89.9
1963	1713	35.0	1743	35.6	692	14.2	744	15.2			5540	5036	90.9
1967	1608	34.0	1804	38.2	704	14.9	611	12.9			5387	4853	90.1
North-West													
1959	1900	36.8	2146	41.6	495	9.6	616	12.0			5796	5266	90.9
1963	1765	34.6	2135	41.9	537	10.5	663	13.0			5769	5189	89.9
1967	1706	34.1	2010	40.2	652	13.0	637	12.7			5638	5133	91.0
North-East													
1959	2645	27.6	4166	43.5	1045	10.9	1373	14.3	341	3.6	10936	9698	88.7
1963	2856	28.5	4530	45.2	1012	10.1	1621	16.2			11202	10154	90.6
1967	2999	28.7	4525	43.3	1357	13.0	1571	15.0			11646	10593	91.0

East	1129	21.4	2920	55.6	215	4.1	989	18.8	5808	5339	91.9
1959	1104	21.2	2804	53.9	250	4.8	905	17.4	5799	5296	91.3
1963	1195	22.2	2894	53.6	286	5.3	1017	18.9	6033	5504	91.2
1967											
South	3234	41.5	2810	36.1	691	8.9	1053	13.5	8708	7948	91.3
1959	3402	41.9	2999	36.9	760	9.4	955	11.8	8853	8249	93.2
1963	3578	42.0	3057	35.9	754	8.9	1123	13.2	9351	8653	92.5
1967											
South-West	4338	39.4	1760	16.0	2911	26.4	1703	15.5	12142	11172	92.0
1959	5040	41.1	2465	20.1	2804	22.8	1969	16.0	13754	12548	91.2
1963	5363	36.0	3529	23.7	3191	21.4	2194	14.7	16726	15213	91.0
1967											
Whole country	33800	39.7	21882	25.7	12909	15.2	13621	16.0	95637	86426	90.4
1959	37021	41.4	25217	28.2	12697	14.2	14274	16.0	99798	90958	91.1
1963	36036	37.5	27029	28.1	15059	15.7	16923	17.6	107101	97855	91.4
1967											

(1): Number of votes
 (2): Per cent of valid votes in each constituency
 (3): Number of eligible voters
 (4a): Voting turnout; number
 (4b): Voting turnout; per cent

IP: Independence Party
 PP: Progressive Party
 SDP: Social Democratic Party
 PA: People's Alliance
 NPP: National Preservation Party

Sources: *Statistics of Iceland*, II, 24, 32, 41.

When the 1959 election took place, there was in power a minority government which the SDP, supported by the IP, had formed following the fall of the Left Government (1956-1958: PP+SDP+PA). The election resulted in the formation of the IP-SDP coalition. This coalition maintained its majority in the 1963 and 1967 elections, its existence being on both occasions the primary issue of the campaign. Up to 1959 frequent changes in the government had been among the main characteristics of Icelandic politics: since the early 1930s no coalition had survived its electoral term. Thus the period from 1959 presents a unique feature of Icelandic politics: an unbroken coalition-opposition pattern.

As in all elections in Iceland during the past three decades the participation in these three elections - 1959, 1963, and 1967 - was in all constituencies around the ninety per cent mark. The smallness of the former constituency units together with the considerable pressure exerted by the political parties has helped to create a strong tradition of election participation which seems likely to be maintained for years to come. The elections' results were also characterized by a similarly old pattern of division: two larger parties, the IP and the PP, which were of approximately the same size in half of the constituencies, alternately exceeding each other in the remaining four; and two smaller parties, the SDP and the PA, which were of roughly similar size in most constituencies. The shares of the IP, the SDP, and the PA were proportionally larger in two of the most urbanized constituencies, Reykjavík and the South-West, whereas the PP dominated more clearly in the rest of the country, being the largest party in five constituencies.

Another traditional feature of Icelandic elections is also borne out by these election results: the great stability in party following from one election to another. As is shown in Table II more than half of the changes in the share of a party per constituency in these elections were less than one per cent of the total votes cast in each of six constituencies, the fluctuations in the two most urban constituencies being more marked.

The great stability in party following, given the nature of the electoral system, makes the occurrence of drastic changes in the composition of the Althingi highly unlikely. With the exception of one party in the 1963 election, no change in the total number of M.A.s which each party obtained amounted to more than one member. This stability characterized both the constituency-elected and the additional sections of the Althingi membership.

The main purpose of the 1959 change in the electoral system was to achieve a greater proportionality in the voters/M.A. ratios on both a party and a constituency basis. Under the previous system the PP and some of the rural constituencies were highly over-represented. In the final election before the change the PP had for instance about 600 fewer voters per M.A. than the other parties, and the difference between the constituencies with the highest and the lowest voters/M.A. ratios amounted to over 3000 even after the additional members had been distributed. So far as the voters/M.A. per party ratios were concerned

Table II. Shifts in election results. Changes in the share of the parties: increase and decrease in the percentage of valid votes

	Elections (1959/1963 and 1963/1967)								
		× parties	0.0-	1.0-	2.0-	3.0-	4.0-	5.0-	6.0-
	× constituencies	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	6.0	7.0	8.0
Reykjavík and S-W	$2 \times 4 \times 2 = 16$	2	5	1	2	4	1		1
Other constituencies	$2 \times 4 \times 6 = 48$	28	12	7	1				
Whole country	$2 \times 4 \times (1) = 8$	3	3	1	1				

Source: Table I.

Table III. Elections results; seats and proportionality

Party/ Elections	Number of seats			Votes per M.A.	Proportionality	
	Constituency seats	Additional seats	Total		Per cent of seats	Per cent of votes
IP 1959	21	3	24	1408	40.0	39.7
1963	20	4	24	1542	40.0	41.4
1967	20	3	23	1566	38.3	37.5
PP 1959	17		17	1287	28.3	25.7
1963	19		19	1327	31.2	28.2
1967	18		18	1501	30.0	28.1
SDP 1959	5	4	9	1434	15.0	15.2
1963	4	4	8	1586	13.3	14.2
1967	5	4	9	1489	15.0	15.7
PA 1959	6	4	10	1362	16.7	16.0
1963	6	3	9	1587	15.0	16.0
1967	6	4	10	1505	16.7	17.6

Sources: Same as Table I.

the 1959 change resulted in a considerable increase in proportionality. The difference between the parties with the highest and the lowest ratios was brought down to the 150-200 mark, being maintained at that level in the following elections. This improvement can also be seen from a comparison of the percentages of seats in the Althingi with the percentages of votes in the whole country for each party. Except for the PP the parties all had corresponding shares of seats and votes. Compared with its percentage of votes the advantage of the PP in the Althingi membership in these three elections was considerably smaller than before. Now it amounted to only one or two members, whereas before it often added up to an advantage of half a dozen members.

Table IV. Proportionality; constituencies

Constituencies	Elections								
	(1): Number of eligible voters per constituency-elected M.A.			(2): Number of eligible voters per M.A., i.e. including additional members			(3): Per cent of all eligible voters in the country		
	1959			1963			1967		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Reykjavik	3336	2668	41.8	3521	2817	42.3	3785	3028	42.4
West	1302	1302	6.8	1326	1326	6.6	1380	1150	6.4
Western-Peninsula	1142	952	6.0	1108	791	5.5	1077	898	5.0
North-West	1159	828	6.1	1154	824	5.8	1128	940	5.3
North-East	1823	1367	11.4	1867	1600	11.2	1941	1456	10.9
East	1162	1162	6.1	1160	1160	5.8	1207	1207	5.6
South	1451	1451	8.9	1475	1475	8.9	1558	1558	8.7
South-West	2427	1518	12.7	2751	1719	13.8	3345	2091	15.6
Whole country	1952	1594	100.0	2034	1663	100.0	2186	1785	100.0

Sources: Same as Table I.

Although the 1959 electoral change achieved a greater equality in party representation, the differences in the voters/M.A. per constituency ratios remained quite considerable. The distribution of additional members, which helped to even out the differences on a party basis, failed to work in a similar direction in the case of the constituencies. The voters/M.A. ratios for Reykjavík were in all three elections, both with and without the additional members, three to four times larger than in the two constituencies, the Western Peninsula and the North-West, which were most favoured by the present system.

Since the two constituencies which have the highest voters/M.A. ratios also have the largest shares of the population and because their disadvantage has been consistently increasing, it is very likely that some time in the near future demands will be voiced for the redressing of the imbalance in the form of yet another change in the electoral system, the first signs of such demands having in fact already appeared. Given the instability of the electoral system, the nature of the developments which in the past preceded the actual alterations, and the arguments traditionally employed, a new change will undoubtedly become easily justifiable within a few years. Since an increase in the Althingi membership will most likely meet with great popular disapproval, it is highly probable that a future change will be in the form of restricting the distribution of the additional members to those constituencies which have the highest voters/constituency-elected M. A. ratios, a method which, if it had been employed in the previous elections, would have produced a greater equality in representation on the constituency basis.

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NOTE

¹ Thus the National Preservation Party failed in 1959 to obtain a seat in the Althingi despite the fact that its total share of the votes amounted to 3.4 per cent, which on a strict proportional basis should have given it two M.A.s. See Table I.