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10. Northern Ireland: from the centre to the margins?

Jonathan Tonge and Jocelyn Evans

Northern Ireland's election had dramatic outcomes and important consequences for the restoration of devolved power-sharing. For the first time, unionist MPs elected to Westminster were in the minority. Nine nationalists won seats, seven taken by Sinn Féin (SF) who refuse to take up their positions in the House of Commons, with the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) recording two constituency triumphs. Eight unionists, all from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) were returned, along with one member of the Alliance Party, not part of either the unionist or nationalist bloc. The once dominant Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) failed to win a seat for the third time in the last four elections.

The previous general election result in Northern Ireland impacted across the UK, with the DUP holding the balance of power at Westminster and entering a confidence-and-supply arrangement with the Conservative Government (HM Government 2017). The story of 2019 was of a reversion to type, with all of Northern Ireland's MPs marginalised. The question begged was how they could articulate Northern Ireland's interests when their contingent was miniscule compared to the size of the Conservatives' majority. As those MPs headed to Westminster (or not, in Sinn Féin's case) the focus switched to the legislature in Belfast. With the DUP's glory days in London over and the Northern Irish electorate impatient with the absence of devolved government (and blaming either of the main two parties) the need for the revival of a local power base was apparent. One month after the election, the Northern Ireland Assembly, absent since January 2017, was duly restored.

This analysis of the general election examines how the contest developed in Northern Ireland, discusses why four seats changed hands and assesses the implications of the outcome.

It examines how arguments over Brexit, unionist, nationalist and pro-Remain pacts, election posters, a blame game over Stormont’s absence and traditional sectarian politics dominated the campaign. In assessing the results, the chapter draws extensively upon data from the 2019 Economic and Social Research Council’s Northern Ireland General Election study, based upon 2,003 post-election interviews with a representative sample of the electorate.¹ All data, other than the overall and constituency results, are taken from the study unless indicated otherwise.

1. The results

Table 10.1 shows the overall results, in terms of votes, percentage shares and seats.

Table 10.1 The 2019 General Election result in Northern Ireland

	VOTES	% VOTE	% CHANGE FROM 2017	SEATS	SEAT CHANGE FROM 2017
DUP	244,127	30.6	-5.4	8	-2
SF	181,853	22.8	-6.7	7	-
Alliance	134,115	16.8	+8.8	1	+1
SDLP	118,737	14.9	+3.1	2	+2
UUP	93,123	11.7	+1.4	0	0
Others	31,412	3.2	-1.5	0	-1

The DUP had a tough defence to mount, having won a record ten seats in 2017. The party lost two of its three Belfast seats, including the North Belfast constituency of Westminster leader Nigel Dodds. Sinn Fein’s return of seven seats matched its 2017 haul and included the notable Dodds scalp but the party’s vote share fell everywhere beyond North Belfast. The SDLP regained the Westminster representation it had lost for the first time in 2017. Party leader Colum Eastwood thrashed Sinn Féin to retake Foyle and Claire Hanna triumphed easily in South Belfast, so two nationalist voices are now heard in the Commons. Table 10.2 shows party fortunes in each constituency.

Table 10.2 Northern Ireland Constituency Results, 2019 General Election

(percentage vote shares)

	(% vote shares)	DUP	UUP	ALLIANCE	SINN FÉIN	SDLP	OTH	CHANGE IN WINNING PARTY'S VOTE SHARE	TURNOUT %	TURNOUT CHANGE from 2017
Belfast East	DUP HOLD	49.2	5.9	44.9	-	-	-	-6.6	64.3	-3.2
Belfast North	SF GAIN	43.1	47.1	9.8	-	-	-	+5.4	68.4	-0.8
Belfast South	SDLP GAIN FROM DUP	24.7	2.7	14.3	-	57.2		+31.3	67.9	-1.8
Belfast West	SF HOLD	13.5	-	4.9	53.8	7.7	20.1	-12.9	59.4	- 6.0
East Antrim	DUP HOLD	45.3	14.7	27.3	5.7	2.4	3.6	-12.0	57.7	- 2.9
East Londonderry	DUP HOLD	40.1	9.2	15.1	15.6	15.7	4.4	-8.0	57.0	- 4.2
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	SF HOLD	-	43.2	5.2	43.3	6.8	1.5	- 3.9	70.1	-5.7
Foyle	SDLP GAIN FROM SF	10.1	2.3	2.7	20.7	57.0	7.1	+17.7	63.7	-1.7
Lagan Valley	DUP HOLD	43.1	19.0	28.8	2.4	3.9	2.8	-16.5	60.2	-2.0
Mid Ulster	SF HOLD	24.5	5.9	7.9	45.9	14.3	1.5	-8.6	63.8	-4.4
Newry & Armagh	SF HOLD	21.7	8.2	8.3	40.0	18.6	3.2	-8.0	62.9	-5.6
North Antrim	DUP HOLD	47.4	18.5	14.1	12.8	6.7	0.5	-11.5	57.5	-6.6
North Down	ALLIANCE GAIN	37.9	12.1	45.2	-	-	4.8	+35.9	60.9	-0.1
South Antrim	DUP HOLD	35.3	29.0	19.1	11.4	5.3	-	-3.0	60.2	-3.1
South Down	SF HOLD	15.3	6.6	13.9	32.4	29.2	2.5	-7.5	63.1	-4.1
Strangford	DUP HOLD	47.2	10.7	28.4	1.5	5.3	6.9	-14.8	56.3	-4.1
Upper Bann	DUP HOLD	41.0	12.4	12.9	24.6	9.2	-	- 2.5	60.7	-3.2
West Tyrone	SF HOLD	40.2	6.7	9.7	40.2	17.8	3.7	-10.6	62.4	-5.8

The rise of Alliance

Perhaps the most striking feature of the results was the rise from fifth to third place, in vote share, of the Alliance Party, rejecting unionism and nationalism. Naomi Long's party gained North Down with 45% of the vote. In 2017, the party's share in the constituency was in

single percentage figures. Alliance’s overall nine-point general election increase in vote share added to the party’s 11 point European and five-point council election increases in 2019. Alliance improved its vote share in 17 of the 18 constituencies. With those rejecting unionist or nationalist labels outnumbering those who do identify as either, by 40% to 28% and 25% respectively, Alliance has a large and growing electoral reservoir in which to fish. Half of those declining to identify as unionist or nationalist did not vote in 2019. Of the half that did, Alliance outscored its closest challenger by two-to-one. As Table 10.3 shows, as Alliance improved its position elsewhere, the DUP and Sinn Féin fell back.

Table 10.3 Party gains and losses in constituency vote share, 2019 General Election in Northern Ireland

Party	Seats contested	Vote share up	Vote share down
DUP	17	1	16
Sinn Féin	15	1	14
Alliance	18	17	1
SDLP	15	10	5
UUP	16	10*	6

UUP ‘increases’ include two seats uncontested in 2017.

Alliance has, belatedly, come a long way. After 45 years marooned on an average 7% vote share, the three elections in 2019 saw the party average 16%, attracting more than 300,000 votes across the trio of contests and gaining 62,000 votes between the 2017 and 2019 general elections. Whilst the UUP’s relatively liberal pro-Union political territory might appear to be most at risk from the Alliance surge, UUP defectors from the 2017 election provided only 3% of the supporters of Naomi Long’s party at the general election. This was a much smaller rate of desertion than the 18% shifting from the DUP (which obviously had the most votes to lose) at the previous contest and 12% from Sinn Fein. Former SDLP voters provided another 5%, whilst 8% of Alliance’s new voters had not voted in the 2017 election. Alliance garnered the

support of a quarter of all non-voters from two years earlier. The party has the youngest voter base, with half aged 45 and under. Alliance's supporters are slightly more likely to be Protestant than Catholic, with percentage support among those of no religion twice that of any other main party. The proportion of Alliance Party voters who are graduates (31%) is double that among DUP and Sinn Fein supporters. Only the SDLP's support comes close.

Alliance's vision is one in which constitutional questions are displaced by local issues. It stresses a desire for a united community and integration not constitutional questions, emphasising it is 'not an orange or green party' (Alliance Party 2019: 3). Alliance's appeal is as a big tent for liberal unionists, moderate nationalists and those neither unionist nor nationalist, although it is not always clear whether the party is attempting to accommodate existing affiliations or promote Northern Irishness to *overcome* British unionist and Irish nationalist identities. The party's voters embrace each identity: 32% British; 34% Irish and 28% Northern Irish. Whilst 'neither unionist nor nationalist' ideological identification is the main choice of Alliance voters, 44% do adopt traditional unionist or nationalist identifications.

2. Continuing polarisation

Does the strong Alliance performance indicate that Northern Ireland's electorate is thawing in terms of sectarian division? Table 10.4 shows the unionist, nationalist and non-aligned shares of the vote, in relation to Protestant, Catholic and no-religion proportions of each constituency, whilst Table 10.5 indicates the correlations between Protestant religious community background and the unionist bloc vote and Catholic religious community background and nationalist bloc vote.

Table 10.4 Unionist, Nationalist and Non-Unionist/Non-Nationalist constituency percentage vote shares, 2019 General Election in Northern Ireland

Constituency	Protestant % of constituency	% Unionist vote	Roman Catholic % of constituency	% Nationalist vote	No religion	% Non-Unionist or Nationalist vote
Belfast East	75.4	55.1	12.7	N/A	10.5	44.9
Belfast North	45.7	43.1	46.9	47.1	6.4	9.8
Belfast South	43.7	27.4	44.0	58.4	9.5	14.2
Belfast West	16.7	13.5	80.1	65.7	2.7	20.8
East Antrim	70.1	62.8	20.4	8.1	8.5	29.1
East Londonderry	53.3	49.3	41.7	35.7	4.4	9.0
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	39.1	43.2	57.7	50.1	2.6	6.7
Foyle	22.0	12.5	75.1	82.0	2.1	5.5
Lagan Valley	71.9	64.9	19.0	6.3	8.1	28.8
Mid Ulster	30.8	30.4	66.7	60.2	2.1	9.4
Newry & Armagh	30.6	30.0	66.4	61.7	2.5	8.3
North Antrim	66.0	65.9	28.4	19.4	4.8	14.7
North Down	74.4	54.8	12.6	N/A	11.8	45.2
South Antrim	59.8	64.3	31.9	16.7	7.6	19.0
South Down	26.9	21.9	69.3	64.2	3.4	13.9
Strangford	73.1	62.7	17.3	6.8	8.7	30.5
Upper Bann	50.0	53.3	44.0	33.8	5.1	12.9
West Tyrone	30.2	28.6	68.0	60.4	1.5	11.0

Note: The Conservative Party and UKIP are classed as unionist. Aontu, as an anti-abortion Irish republican party, is classed as nationalist. People Before Profit, the Greens and an Independent are classed as non-unionist and non-nationalist.

Source for religious composition of constituencies: Russell (2013).

Table 10.5 Correlations between religious community background and Unionist or Nationalist bloc vote, 2005-19 General Elections in Northern Ireland

	2005	2010	2015	2017	2019
Catholic-Nationalist	0.98	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.95
Protestant-Unionist	0.97	0.94	0.92	0.96	0.93

*all significant at $p < 0.001$

As Table 10.5 shows, heralding a thaw and hailing the arrival of electoral Spring would be premature. Despite a modest weakening, the association between religious community background and unionist and nationalist bloc votes remains very strong. Support for the DUP or UUP remains very extensive among those identified as holding a Protestant community background at the last census (admittedly dated now, having been conducted in 2011) and the same applies to backing for Sinn Féin and the SDLP among those from a Catholic background. In the 2019 Northern Ireland election survey, no Catholics ‘admitted’ voting for either the DUP or UUP, an absence of selection reciprocated by Protestants in terms of Sinn Féin, with only 1% backing the SDLP. Table 10.6 provides party support by religion.

Table 10.6 Voting by Religion, 2019 General Election in Northern Ireland (%)

	Catholics	Protestants
DUP	0	54
UUP	0	24
SF	51	0
SDLP	28	1
ALLIANCE	13	17
Other	8	5

More than two decades after the Good Friday Agreement, progress towards electoral rapprochement, in terms of voting for a party on the other side of the sectarian divide, appears virtually non-existent. Any thawing is likely to be via the diminution of religious communal identification and the willingness to vote for a non-bloc party, not the propensity to vote for the ‘other side’s’ bloc parties.

Nonetheless, the 2019 election did produce more constituency outliers in terms of the religion-vote relationship, plotted in Figure 10.1 (Protestant-Unionist vote) and Figure 10.2 (Catholic-Nationalist vote). A weakening of the relationship would see much greater scattering but most constituencies remain close to the line. The labelled constituencies are ones where the distance from the trend lines is +/- 10% or more. Belfast South is an outlier for both communities. With a pro-Remain pact between the SDLP and Sinn Féin, the latter standing aside, nationalists voted wholesale for the SDLP. The below-par unionist vote may have reflected some acceptance of the situation by liberal Protestants in a middle-class constituency. This was the only seat where Alliance’s vote share dropped. In North Down, the liberal Protestant vote went to the Alliance candidate, Stephen Farry, with all other pro-Remain parties standing aside, explaining why the unionist vote was below what might have been expected given the constituency’s religious background profile. In East Belfast, the high-profile Alliance Party leader, Naomi Long, polled very strongly, as she had at the previous three contests. South Antrim was the site of the only DUP versus UUP close contest, a scenario which mobilised unionists, reflected in a total unionist vote beyond what might have been expected. Regarding the other nationalist outliers beyond Belfast South, Foyle reflects how nationalists came out in large numbers, in what appeared a marginal seat, to ensure a huge victory for the SDLP at the expense of Sinn Féin, who had captured the seat for the first time in 2017 by a mere 169 votes. The nationalist vote in West Belfast is lower than might be expected because of the sizeable (16%) vote share for the left-wing People Before Profit.

Figure 10.1 The Unionist vote and percentage of Protestants in each constituency, 2019 General Election in Northern Ireland

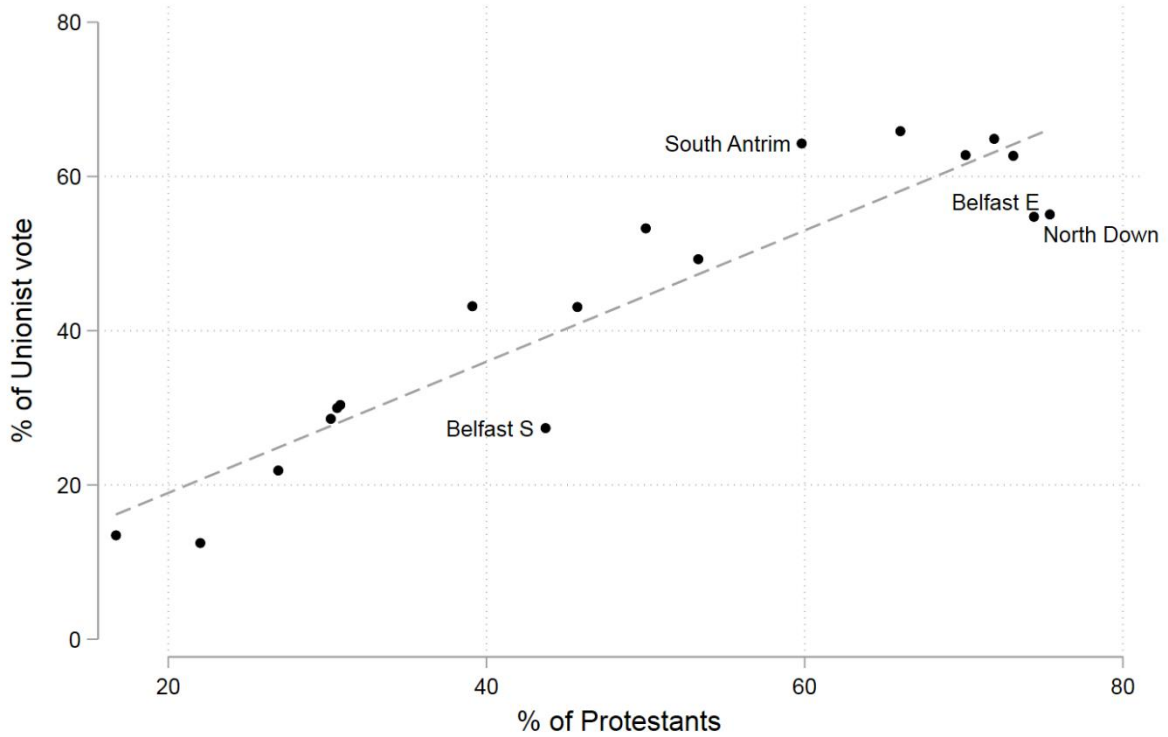
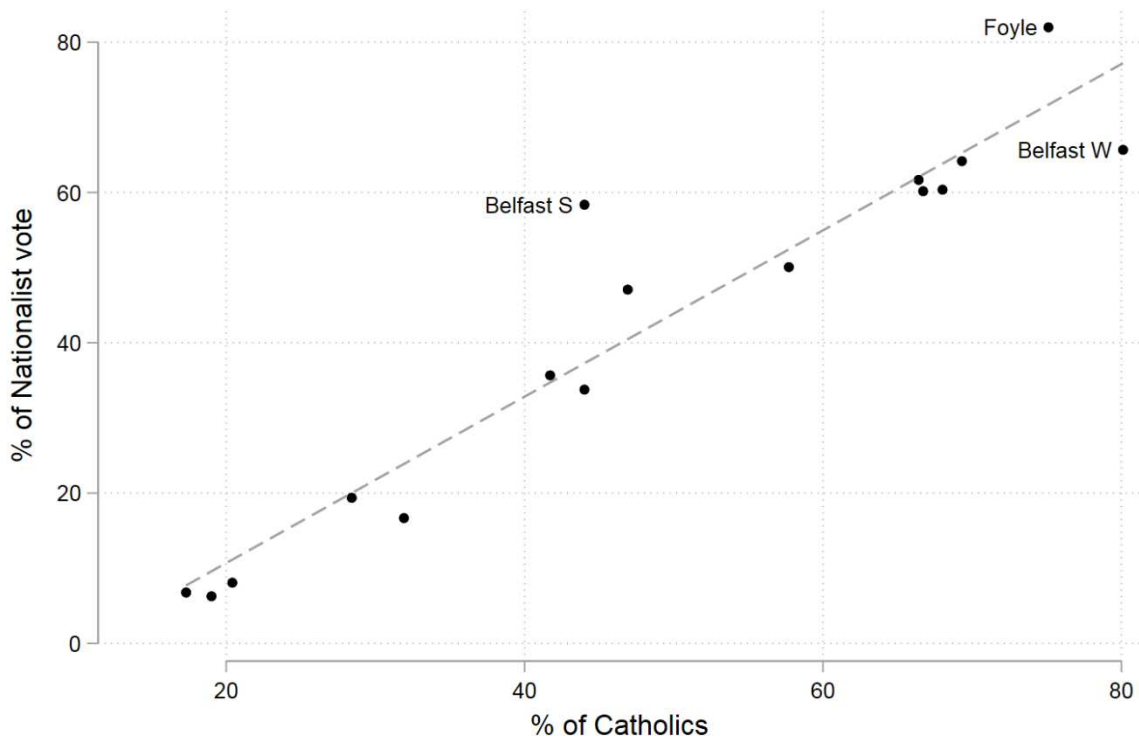


Figure 10.2 The Nationalist Vote and Percentage of Catholics in each constituency, General Election in Northern Ireland



Although it has been suggested that British or Irish political parties might usefully stand in Northern Ireland to break the ‘place apart’ sectarian logjam, the idea does not really fly and divides voters on sectarian lines. Voters for Sinn Féin are five times more likely to be against British parties standing than support the idea, but, by two-to-one, they back Irish parties such as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, contesting elections in Northern Ireland. Two-thirds of DUP voters oppose Irish political parties contesting elections in Northern Ireland with only 9% in favour. They back other British parties standing by 44% to 26%.

Young people are the least enamoured with the current political dispensation. Among 18 to 24-year olds, two-thirds did not vote at the 2019 general election, a proportion identical to that at the 2017 contest and a majority decline to identify as unionist or nationalist. Whilst neither had a particularly successful election, the DUP and Sinn Féin continue to be perceived as the stouter representatives of their ethno-national bloc, explaining their continued dominance in a system favouring ethnic tribune parties (Mitchell et al. 2009).

Considerable polarisation is evident in the perceptions of performances of party leaders, which appear highly conditioned by communal background. Almost one-third of DUP voters rated Arlene Foster at ten out of ten, on a zero (don’t rate at all) to ten (rate very highly) scale. More than two-thirds of DUP voters rated their leader at eight or above and more than half of UUP voters also rated Foster at seven or higher. In contrast, a clear majority (56%) of Sinn Féin voters gave the DUP leader the minimum rating of zero and 44% of SDLP voters did likewise. Only 2% of Sinn Féin voters rated Foster at six or above. Forty percent of those same voters gave UUP leader Steve Aiken zero, even though had only been in the job for 33 days when the election took place.

The antipathy is reciprocated. Some 43% of DUP voters ranked Sinn Féin’s northern leader, Michelle O’Neill at zero and 75% rated her no higher than two out of ten. Meanwhile

the majority (55%) of Sinn Féin voters ranked their leader at eight or above. Only 1% of unionist voters give O’Neill a positive rating (i.e. six or above). SDLP leader Colum Eastwood must feel positively loved in comparison, with 9% of Unionist voters rating him at six out of ten or higher.

Alliance’s Naomi Long escapes the worst of the opprobrium, making her overall the most popular – or least unpopular – party leader. Even here, 12% of DUP and 15% of Sinn Fein curmudgeons give her a zero. UUP voters are the most negative (68% rate Long only between zero and five). SDLP voters are much warmer, two-thirds offering a positive ranking for Long of six or above. Table 10.7 provides the scoring for the main party leaders.

Table 10.7 Views of party leaders – by party voted for (%)

‘On a scale of 0-10 where 0 means you don’t rate that leader at all and 10 where you rate that very highly indeed, please give your views on these political leaders’

	Arlene FOSTER DUP	Arlene FOSTER DUP	Michelle O’NEILL SF	Michelle O’NEILL SF	Steve AIKEN UUP	Steve AIKEN UUP	Colum EASTWOOD SDLP	Colum EASTWOOD SDLP	Naomi LONG Alliance	Naomi LONG Alliance
Score	0-5	6-10	0-5	6-10	0-5	6-10	0-5	6-10	0-5	6-10
DUP voters	10	90	98	2	55	45	93	7	71	29
UUP voters	30	70	99	1	7	93	85	15	68	32
SF voters	98	2	13	87	95	5	57	43	55	45
SDLP voters	94	6	54	46	88	12	5	95	31	69
ALLIANCE voters	83	17	75	25	75	25	64	36	12	88

3. Brexit pacts, an ‘economic united Ireland’ and constitutional futures

The election campaign featured rows over Brexit-related pacts, tinged with an older Orange versus Green sectarian flavour. The DUP defended its confidence-and-supply deal with the Conservative government as attracting a large amount of extra funding, highlighting the

substantial extra cash for health, schools and employment (Democratic Unionist Party 2019). Towards its end however, the DUP had been dismissively cast aside by Prime Minister Johnson, who reached a Brexit deal which aligned Northern Ireland much more closely to the EU than the rest of the UK. Johnson had promised the DUP the opposite at their party conference one year earlier.

Amid much derision aimed towards the DUP for its pro-Brexit strategy having resulted in a Brexit now disowned, the election was marked by ‘Remain pacts’. Despite having criticised Sinn Féin for decades for abstaining from Westminster, the SDLP standing aside for Sinn Féin in North Belfast was justified by Colum Eastwood’s party on the grounds it was better no-one attend parliament than a Brexiteer. Abstention remains totemic for Sinn Féin and there are no moves to change policy and swear an oath of allegiance to a British monarch. Even though the election survey data suggests a slight overall majority of Sinn Féin voters support their party taking seats (it was unionist voters who were opposed) the issue is not being debated within Sinn Féin’s ranks. Those who think Sinn Féin should take their seats still voted Sinn Féin regardless. Moreover, the large Conservative majority would offer no traction at Westminster. No Northern Ireland representatives were invited onto the Commons Brexit committee following the election.

Sinn Féin’s returning of the SDLP’s favour in South Belfast led to unionist complaints that ‘Remain’ pacts were ‘pan-nationalist’ fronts, thinly veiled anti-DUP decapitation tactics. However, the DUP was content to see pan-unionist fronts. The UUP stood aside to try and aid the DUP in North Belfast and the DUP reciprocated for the UUP in a similarly unsuccessful pact in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Unionism versus nationalism was thus mapped onto the Remain versus Leave battles. For all the noise, most unionist and nationalist voters are not opposed to pacts. Whilst there are many undecideds, only 22% of DUP voters dislike them and

just 12% of UUP voters are similarly hostile. On the other side of the divide, 29% of Sinn Fein and 21% of SDLP voters reject pan-nationalist pacts.

Brexit was indeed the issue identified as most important at the election by the electorate, followed, amid an acute local health crisis, by the NHS and then the older constitutional question of Northern Ireland's place in the UK versus Irish unity. However, DUP voters placed the NHS above Brexit in order of importance. The latter was listed in the top two concerns of only 35% of such supporters, reflecting the belief of some DUP backers that the predicted negative consequences of EU would not ensue. The DUP opposed Boris Johnson's form of Brexit more than parties which supported Remain. A sense of betrayal was apparent. Only 4% of DUP voters (and Unionist voters more broadly) rejected the confidence-and-supply deal at its outset. DUP members favour the Conservatives to Labour by seven-to-one (Tonge et al. 2014). Yet the Conservative-DUP deal had seemingly ended in tears with Northern Ireland still closely and uniquely aligned to the EU, creating trade barriers within the UK internal market. The Prime Minister's deal with the Taoiseach and the EU accepted the semi-detachment of Northern Ireland via, effectively, a border in the Irish Sea, terms that Johnson (2018) had told the DUP conference one year earlier 'no British Conservative government could or should sign up to'. The nationalist perspective was that the DUP had acted as midwife to a Brexit rejected by a majority in Northern Ireland and so deserved electoral sanction.

Recognising the new realities after the election however, the DUP appeared more sanguine over what the Prime Minister had agreed. The party's new Westminster leader, Jeffrey Donaldson (2020) commented that 'customs checks doesn't mean that you change the constitutional status of a part of the United Kingdom' and spoke about 'exploiting the opportunities' of bespoke EU and UK market access. It appeared that most DUP voters still backed Brexit, but with some slippage in support for Leave and with backers of Arlene Foster's party eschewing possible consequences. Support for Brexit fell from 67% reported at the 2016

referendum (Garry 2017) to 56% of the 2019 DUP general election supporters saying they still favoured EU departure. Among all DUP voters, only 31% said checks on goods travelling between Northern Ireland and Ireland would be acceptable, eschewing a hard border and only 22% accepted the 'East-West border' of Johnson's EU deal, checks on goods transported between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Even a majority (53%) of Sinn Féin's voters rejected East-West checks, despite the argument that treating trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland as 'exports' suited the party's ultimate constitutional agenda in representing a shift towards an economic united Ireland. Naturally, Sinn Féin voters overwhelmingly opposed greater friction in trade across the border in Ireland.

4. The restoration of the devolved power-sharing Assembly

The election result and context made the rapid restoration of the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive inevitable. The DUP's Westminster influence was removed. Its vote share had dropped, as had Sinn Féin's, as electors appeared unimpressed at their absence from the region's political institutions. The Secretary of State threatened new Assembly elections if the parties did not return to government in Northern Ireland, which given the desertions of the DUP and Sinn Féin by some voters did not augur well for the big two. Some contentious issues had been dealt with at Westminster, which had legalised same-sex marriage and abortion in Northern Ireland. Amid an unaddressed local health crisis, there was overwhelming support for the return of the devolved institutions among electors, only 2% not wanting them back. Sinn Féin's return as a party of government in the North preceded a strong showing at the election in the South, as the party topped the poll in the election there in February 2020.

The consequence of the pressure from the voters and the British and Irish governments was a restoration of devolved government one month after the election, under the 'New Decade, New Approach' deal (HM Government 2020). The extent of change from previous

Assembly arrangements appeared modest. Irish language and Ulster-Scots provisions were introduced, with a commissioner for each. An Office of Identity and Cultural Expression was established. These arrangements looked akin to a draft plan rejected internally by the DUP in 2018, indicating how it was the political and electoral context that had changed far more than legislative proposals. There were slight alterations to veto rights over legislation. Provision for an official opposition was bolstered, but all the main parties chose to enter the ruling Executive anyway. That Executive would be given more time to recover in the event of future collapse before fresh elections were required. New Assembly sub-committees were created on Brexit and a Bill of Rights. However, the Secretary of State presiding over Stormont's restoration, Julian Smith, was sacked two months after the election. Smith had agreed to implement the 2014 Stormont House Agreement to address conflict legacy issues. Its provisions included continuing investigations into the past actions in the Troubles, regardless of perpetrator. Potential further prosecutions of British soldiers did not find favour among sections of the Conservative Party.

The 'New Decade New Approach' accord nonetheless promised a sustained devolved government. Beyond how to deal with the past, its major controversy concerned the level of new funding. Northern Ireland's extra one billion pounds of funding extracted by the DUP as between 2017-19 had bypassed the Barnett Formula (Birrell and Heenan 2019) and added to a level of subsidy per head which already exceeded that found elsewhere in the UK (Keep 2016). The parties re-entering devolved government received a similar windfall.

One of the divisions that had beset the Assembly previously was in the rear-view mirror at least. The blocking of same-sex marriage by unionist members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, using a Petition of Concern which requires cross-community support for a measure, had been overcome by Westminster passing legislation, introduced by the Labour MP, Conor McGinn, permitting such unions. February 2020 saw Northern Ireland's first same-sex

marriage. More voters from each of the main five parties supported the change than were opposed. Overall, one-quarter of electors still disagreed with legalisation, but even among those aged 65 and over, only 43% thought it the wrong decision, with a mere 8% of 18-24-year olds opposed to the change. Abortion, however, remained a potentially awkward issue for the Assembly. It was also legalised in Northern Ireland via direct Westminster legislation towards the end of the Assembly hiatus. Ironically, the legislation introduced by Labour MP, Stella Creasy, converted Northern Ireland's abortion legislation from the most restrictive in western Europe to the most permissive in terms of time limits. None of the main parties' bases support this extension of time limits for abortion to 28 weeks but only one-third of electors wished to return to the previous position of abortion being permitted only when the mother's life was in danger.

Meanwhile, divisions over an Irish Language Act remained acute. Only 8% of DUP and UUP voters believed there should be one. A mere 3% of Sinn Féin and SDLP voters believed there should not. 'New Decade New Approach' fudged the issue by introducing Irish language and Ulster-Scots provisions and dedicated language commissioners akin to what a separate bill might provide, but via amendments to existing legislation rather than the standalone act demanded by Sinn Féin and Irish language activists.

However, inter-communal relations beyond elections, parties and language issues appeared healthier. Almost 70% of respondents said they 'would not mind' if a close relative married outside their religion and an unconcerned majority was present among supporters of all parties. Only 7% stated they would 'mind a lot'. One-third of respondents said they would prefer to send their children to a single-religion school but almost half preferred a mixed-religion establishment.

5. A Border Poll?

The election took place amid speculation that Brexit would advance the cause of a united Ireland. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement permits the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to call a border poll if it appears that public opinion on a united Ireland may be in favour. Supporters of Irish unity can play a long game. If a border poll is lost, another can – but does not have to be – called seven years later. Sinn Féin called for a referendum within five years. Yet the prospect of Irish unity still appeared distant. Table 10.8 shows the level of support for Irish unification by ideological association and Table 10.9 by party voted for.

Table 10.8 How would you vote in a Border Poll tomorrow, by self-identification as Unionist, Nationalist, or Neither? (%)

	All	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither Unionist nor Nationalist
NI stay in UK	65	99	8	73
United Ireland	35	1	92	27

*This and subsequent tables exclude don't knows.

Table 10.9 How would you vote in a Border Poll tomorrow, by party voted for in the 2019 General Election in Northern Ireland? (%)

	NI in UK	United Ireland
DUP	99	1
UUP	99	1
SF	8	92
SDLP	19	81
ALLIANCE	70	30

The seemingly low support for a united Ireland appeared to offer unionists hope of a celebrating a bicentenary for Northern Ireland, let alone the 2021 centenary. That only 29% of electors say they would vote for a united Ireland in a border poll tomorrow, against 52% saying

they would vote for Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK, might provide Unionists with reassurance. When ‘don’t knows’ are removed, the figures break down at 65% to 35% in favour of the status quo. If the results include only those who voted in the 2019 election, people we might reasonably assume would also show up on referendum day, 61% back Northern Ireland staying in the UK, against 39% wanting Irish unity. The findings offer an antidote to post-Brexit speculation concerning the imminence of Irish unity. From a very different perspective, hardline republicans might also claim vindication in dissenting from Sinn Féin’s strategy of accepting the northern consent principle.

The Sinn Féin leadership has not claimed a united Ireland is inevitable but rather that unity is to be striven and prepared for. The party’s approach is that a prospectus for a united Ireland needs to be constructed in advance of a referendum on the constitutional question. Ideally, this would involve unionists but whether many would participate in discussions over the dissolution of ‘their’ country is debatable. Detailed consideration of the data perhaps offers more hope to republicans. First, although supporters of the constitutional status quo enjoy a big lead over backers of Irish unity, the indication that only a bare overall majority of Northern Ireland’s citizens say they would vote for the maintenance of the Union is perhaps not a resounding endorsement of a political entity. Second, there has been a 2% rise in support for Irish unification since the 2017 election. That appears modest but if such a rate of increase is maintained every two-and-a-half years it would produce a majority for a united Ireland within a quarter-of-a-century. Third, nearly 17% of respondents said they didn’t know how they would vote, giving a big number of electors to work upon.

The pro-unity election study figure of 29% is the highest so far from an interview-based survey. Online surveys have produced much higher levels of support for unification (e.g. Ashcroft 2019). Given that a border poll is in the gift of the British Secretary of State, who is required to call one when he or she believes that there may be a majority for a united Ireland,

agreed criteria on how judgements of public opinion are formulated would be useful. At the general election, the combined support for nationalist and republican parties - those that favour a united Ireland - totalled 39 percent, 10% above support reported for a united Ireland in the 2019 General Election study, but below online polling, whilst the combined unionist vote amounted to 42%, again 10% below the percentage saying they would vote for the Union in a border poll. There are plenty who are constitutionally ambiguous or undecided, not reflected in the voting figures. Whilst 81% of voters opted for unionist or nationalist parties at the general election, the largest section of the electorate – as distinct from voters – claims to be ‘neither unionist nor nationalist’ (see Table 10.10) and breaks almost three-to-one in favour of the constitutional status quo. Among actual voters in 2019, Sinn Fein needs to convert 12 in every 100 voters to back unity to bridge the 24-point gap between those who are pro-Union and pro-United Ireland. The most obvious group to target is those who say they are neither unionist nor nationalist but who do vote.

Nationalist parties were outpolled by unionists in first preference votes in both the 2019 council and European elections, by 44% to 36% each time. Whilst plausible in the long-term, a united Ireland still looks somewhat distant, even though unionists have lost their overall seat majorities at both Westminster and Stormont. The most obvious recent shifts have been, firstly, towards ideological dealignment and secondly, in movement to the constitutionally neutral Alliance Party whose support base resides principally among the ‘neither’ category and whose backers favour Northern Ireland’s current status by more than two-to-one.

Table 10.10 Ideology, by party voted for, 2019 General Election in Northern Ireland (%)

	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither
EVERYONE	31	26	43
DUP	77	0	23
UUP	74	1	25
SF	0	80	20
SDLP	2	58	40
ALLIANCE	25	19	56

The election study nonetheless indicates the considerable extent to which Irish identity is now held within a polity once seen as an acutely British part of the United Kingdom, as Table 10.11 indicates. There is little difference in size between the sections of the population holding British or Irish identities.

Table 10.11 Primary national Identity in Northern Ireland, by party voted for, 2019 General Election in Northern Ireland (%)

	British	Irish	Northern Irish	Ulster	European	Other
EVERYONE	35	36	24	2	2	1
DUP	79	0	19	2	0	0
UUP	74	1	20	3	2	0
SF	0	88	10	0	2	0
SDLP	2	73	20	1	4	0
ALLIANCE	32	34	28	2	4	0

Table 10.11 also indicates the continuing polarisation of identities. The eschewal of Britishness by nationalist party voters and the similar refusal of unionists to adopt an Irish identity are unsurprising. Perhaps starker though is that whilst the hybrid Northern Irish identity has grown marginally since the 2017 General Election, it is a minority taste even among those voting for a multi-ethnic party in Alliance. That said, Northern Irish identity is held by at least some of the supporters of each of the main parties.

6. Conclusion

There were several election consequences for Northern Ireland. The first was the marginalisation of its elected representatives at Westminster, with the DUP removed from its pivotal Westminster role, Sinn Féin absent as always and the three other MPs up against a large Conservative majority. Second, and interlinked, was that isolation at Westminster renewed the focus upon restoration of devolved power sharing, quickly restored as all parties recognised the need for a local power base. Third, all three elections, council, European and Westminster, in Northern Ireland in 2019 confirmed the growth of the political centre, in the form of Alliance, steadfastly eschewing unionist and nationalist ideologies and in so doing refusing electoral pacts with parties on either side of the divide. Alliance finally appeared capable of tapping into some of the ever-growing number of those declining traditional ideological affiliations. The party was helped by frustration over the absence of devolution, with the DUP and Sinn Féin seemingly blamed. Despite the rise of an ‘other’ party, the revived Assembly is still based upon the Good Friday Agreement framework of management of the unionist versus nationalist faultline. Finally, the shift towards Irish economic unity under a bespoke Brexit for Northern Ireland ensures that a constitutional united Ireland remains a live issue. The Secretary of State can call a border poll under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement if it appears likely there is a majority favouring a united Ireland. That still seems unlikely anytime soon but, with Sinn Féin a significant political force on either side of the border, the constitutional referendums in both jurisdictions required prior to reunification remain a live long-term prospect.

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¹The Northern Ireland general election survey was conducted between 28 December 2019 and 11 February 2020. The Principal Investigator was Professor Jon Tonge (University of Liverpool) with co-investigators Professor Peter Shirlow (Liverpool) Professor Bernadette Hayes (Aberdeen) Professor Jocelyn Evans (Leeds) and Dr Paul Mitchell (LSE). It involved interviews with a representative sample of 2,003 respondents, in 90 electoral wards across Northern Ireland's 18 constituencies. The study covers voters and non-voters at the election. It was funded mainly by the Economic and Social Research Council, with further support from

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