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8. Northern Ireland: triumph for the Democratic Unionist Party

Jonathan Tonge and Jocelyn Evans

The General Election result in Northern Ireland impacted across the UK. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) enjoyed a double victory. It extended dominance of the unionist community and collected a bigger prize as its ten MPs (a record tally) held a pivotal position at Westminster. In holding the balance of power in the House of Commons, the DUP was not shy in articulating its price for supporting the otherwise friendless Conservative government in key votes, extracting £1billion of new funding for Northern Ireland. The DUP's hegemonic position within its unionist constituency was matched by Sinn Féin's obliteration of its Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) rival within the nationalist community, but without any obvious reward for republicans. At a time of considerable instability, with Northern Ireland's political institutions undergoing one of their episodic crises, unionist and nationalist voters overwhelmingly backed the dominant representative forces within their respective ethno-national blocs. This analysis of the election draws upon data from the 2017 Economic and Social Research Council's Northern Ireland General Election study to examine why the DUP and Sinn Féin dominated the contest and looks at the implications of the outcome in Northern Ireland and at Westminster.[1]

The results

The onward march of the DUP and Sinn Féin saw the departure from the House of Commons of the two Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and three SDLP MPs. Table 8.1 shows the results.

Table 8.1 2017 General Election Result in Northern Ireland (main parties)

	Seats	Change from 2015	Votes	% Vote share	Change in % vote share from 2015
DUP	10	+2	292,316	36.0	+10.3
Sinn Féin	7	+3	238,915	29.4	+ 4.9
Independent Unionist	1	-	16,148	N/A	N/A
SDLP	0	-3	95,419	11.7	- 2.2
UUP	0	-2	83,280	10.3	- 5.8
Alliance	0	0	64,553	7.9	- 0.6

Turnout 65.6% (+7.1%)

The DUP and Sinn Féin both enjoyed record highs for their vote shares and seats for a Westminster election and the 'big two' now hold all bar one seat. Two decades earlier, the rival Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) held ten seats and the SDLP three, with the DUP and Sinn Féin mustering a mere two each. Having regained Westminster representation in 2015, the UUP's Tom Elliott lost Fermanagh and South Tyrone to Sinn Féin despite the DUP again standing aside to aid the chances of a unionist victory, whilst Danny Kinahan lost South Antrim to the DUP. Sinn Féin captured Foyle and South Down, SDLP seats since 1983 and 1987 respectively, whilst South Belfast was also lost by the SDLP, to the DUP. The only seat which did not fall to either of the major parties was North Down, held by the Independent Unionist, Lady Sylvia Hermon (a UUP MP until 2010) with her majority over the DUP reduced from 9,202 to 1,208 votes. Turnout in nationalist-held constituencies remained higher than those in unionist-held constituencies, at 68.4 per cent to 63.4 per cent respectively. There were swings from the SDLP to Sinn Féin in all constituencies and from the UUP to DUP wherever both those parties contested a seat.

The thinness of Northern Ireland's centre ground, at least in terms of voters, was again confirmed by the seat-less performance of Alliance, notwithstanding a continuing sizeable vote for the party leader, Naomi Long, in East Belfast. Elections remain contests for ideological true believers. Of electors self-identifying as unionist, 76 per cent voted, whilst 78 per cent of nationalist self-identifiers cast a ballot. Of those declining to identify as unionist or nationalist, only 37 per cent bothered to vote.

Table 8.2 provides the detailed constituency results whilst Table 8.3 shows the correlation between 2015 and 2017 election performances for the two largest parties.

Table 8.2 Northern Ireland constituency results, 2017 Westminster election

	(% vote shares)	DUP	UUP	ALLIANCE	SINN FÉIN	SDLP	OTH	TURNOUT	TURNOUT CHANGE from 2015	% SWING from 2015
Belfast East	DUP HOLD	55.8	3.3	36.0	2.1	0.4	2.4	67.5	+4.7	6.6 Alliance to DUP
Belfast North	DUP HOLD	46.2	n/a	5.4	41.7	4.5	2.2	67.6	+8.4	N/A
Belfast South	DUP GAIN FROM SDLP	30.4	3.5	18.2	16.3	25.9	5.6	66.1	+6.1	N/A
Belfast West	SF HOLD	13.4	n/a	1.9	66.7	7.0	11.0	65.4	+8.8	12.5 OTH TO SF
East Antrim	DUP HOLD	57.3	11.9	15.6	9.3	3.4	2.5	60.6	+7.3	14.0 UUP TO DUP
East Londonderry	DUP HOLD	48.1	7.6	6.2	26.5	10.8	0.8	61.2	+9.3	6.9 UUP TO DUP
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	SF GAIN FROM UUP	n/a	45.5	1.7	47.2	4.8	0.8	75.8	+3.2	1.2 SDLP to SF
Foyle	SF GAIN FROM SDLP	16.1	n/a	1.8	39.7	39.3	3.0	65.4	+12.6	8.0 SDLP to SF
Lagan Valley	DUP HOLD	59.6	16.8	11.1	3.5	7.5	1.5	62.2	+6.3	5.0 UUP to DUP

Mid Ulster	SF HOLD	26.9	6.5	2.3	54.5	9.8	0.0	68.2	+7.9	4.1 SDLP to SF
Newry & Armagh	SF HOLD	24.6	8.3	2.3	47.9	16.9	0.0	68.5	+4.3	7.0 SDLP to SF
North Antrim	DUP HOLD	58.9	7.2	5.6	16.3	5.3	6.8	64.1	+8.9	12.3 OTH (TUV) TO DUP
North Down	IND UNIONIST HOLD	38.0	n/a	9.3	1.4	1.0	41.1 IND UNIONIST 9.0 OTH	61.0	+9.2	11.3 IND UNIONIST TO DUP
South Antrim	DUP GAIN FROM UUP	38.2	30.8	7.4	18.1	5.5	0.0	63.3	+9.1	5.0 UUP to DUP
South Down	SDLP HOLD	17.4	3.9	3.6	39.9	35.1	0.0	67.2	+10.4	9.3 SDLP to SF
Strangford	DUP HOLD	62.0	11.4	14.7	2.8	6.2	2.9	60.4	+7.6	10.3 UUP to DUP
Upper Bann	DUP HOLD	43.5	15.4	4.5	27.9	8.6	0.0	63.9	+4.9	11.7 UUP to DUP
West Tyrone	SF HOLD	26.9	5.2	2.3	50.7	13.0	1.9	68.2	+7.7	5.5 SDLP to SF

Table 8.3 Correlations between 2015 and 2017 Westminster Election vote at constituency level

2017	DUP (2015)	UUP (2015)	Alliance (2015)	SDLP (2015)	SF (2015)
DUP (16)	0.96 (16)				
UUP (15)		0.84 (13)			
Alliance (18)			0.94 (18)		
SDLP (18)				0.96 (18)	

SF (18)					0.96 (18)

Note: all correlations significant at p < .0001

As always with Northern Ireland elections, the contest appeared to be a communal headcount. Table 8.4 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 8.5 indicates the continuing strong correlation between religious community background and the unionist and nationalist bloc votes. In terms of its over-arching inter-communal ethno-religious division at least, Northern Ireland shows little sign of thawing.

Table 8.4 Unionist, Nationalist and Non-Unionist/Non-Nationalist vote shares, 2017 Westminster election

Constituency	Protestant % of constituency	% Unionist vote	Roman Catholic % of constituency	% Nationalist vote	No religion	% Non Unionist or Nationalist vote
Belfast East	75.4	60.1	12.7	2.5	10.5	37.4
Belfast North	45.7	46.2	46.9	46.2	6.4	7.6
Belfast South	43.7	34.5	44.0	42.2	9.5	23.3
Belfast West	16.7	13.4	80.1	73.7	2.7	13.0
East Antrim	70.1	71.6	20.4	12.7	8.5	15.6
East Londonderry	53.3	56.5	41.7	37.3	4.4	6.2
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	39.1	45.5	57.7	52.0	2.6	2.5
Foyle	22.0	16.1	75.1	79.0	2.1	4.9
Lagan Valley	71.9	77.4	19.0	11.0	8.1	11.6
Mid Ulster	30.8	33.4	66.7	64.3	2.1	2.3
Newry & Armagh	30.6	32.9	66.4	64.8	2.5	2.3
North Antrim	66.0	72.9	28.4	21.6	4.8	5.6

North Down	74.4	81.5	12.6	2.4	11.8	16.1
South Antrim	59.8	69.0	31.9	25.6	7.5	5.4
South Down	26.9	21.3	69.3	75.0	3.4	5.7
Strangford	73.1	74.7	17.3	9.0	8.7	16.3
Upper Bann	50.0	58.9	44.0	36.5	5.1	4.5
West Tyrone	30.2	32.1	68.0	63.7	1.5	4.2

Source for religious composition of constituencies: Russell, R. (2013) Census 2011: Key Statistics at Assembly Area Level, Northern Ireland Research and Information Service Information Paper NIAR 161-13, available at http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2012/general/7013.pdf, accessed 11 September 2017.

Table 8.5 Correlations between religious community background and Unionist or Nationalist bloc vote, 2005-17

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

*all significant at p<0.0001

Explaining the result

The DUP's new position of strength represented a dramatic transformation in fortunes from the March 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly election, precipitated when Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness, in his final political act, resigned as Deputy First Minister, effectively collapsing the devolved Executive and Assembly. At the March contest, the DUP lost ten seats and Sinn Féin closed the gap on the DUP to a solitary seat. For the first time, unionism lost its overall majority at Stormont.

The DUP struggled partly because the Assembly was being reduced in size from 108 to 90. Representation for each constituency was reduced from six to five Assembly members (MLAs). Most MLAs lost by the DUP were in constituencies where the party was attempting to hold a third seat. DUP losses were inevitable given the diminished Assembly size but beyond the headline of DUP MLAs losing seats it was also apparent the DUP remained solidly the dominant party of the unionist bloc. Although heavily criticised for a negative, anti-republican, sectarian headcount form of campaign, the DUP leader, Arlene Foster, had not misread the mood of unionism in the Assembly election. The UUP's failure to make inroads into the DUP's vote led to its leader, Mike Nesbitt, resigning before all the results were finalised. Three months later, under the first-past-the-post, winner-takes-all, voting system used exclusively for Westminster elections, unionists had to choose a solitary constituency

representative for their ethno-national bloc. The DUP was clearly seen as the stouter custodian of unionist interests and its vote soared and the UUP vote crumbled.

In the Assembly election, the DUP leader Foster had, however, underestimated the extent of anger among republicans, who she labelled as 'crocodiles', always coming back for more. Sinn Féin fought the March Assembly and June Westminster elections by mobilising nationalists and republicans on a series of grievances against the DUP. These charges included the botched handling of the overly generous Renewable Heating Incentive Scheme by Arlene Foster, which contributed to the collapse of the Assembly, but was less salient as an election feature; Brexit, against which 88 per cent of nationalists voted (Garry, 2017); the continued prohibition of same-sex marriage, blocked by the DUP five times in Assembly votes; the failure to introduce an Irish Language Act and the lack of movement on implementing items supposedly dealing with the past, which were agreed in the 2014 Stormont House Agreement.

By the time of the General Election, a mere three months later, none of these disputes were any closer to resolution. An inquiry into the heating scheme debacle had been announced but its verdict was a long way off; Brexit continued to polarise; the DUP's defence of 'traditional marriage' was maintained and there was no Assembly or Executive to bring about an Irish Language Act, not that the unionist parties would have endorsed such a measure anyway. Polarisation remained evident. 84 per cent of Sinn Féin voters wanted an Irish Language Act, with only four per cent opposed, whereas only 10 per cent of DUP voters backed the idea. On dealing with the past, the proposals contained in the Stormont House Agreement were only modest and included the continuation of prosecutions for actions during the Troubles, as part of a victim-centred approach. However, prosecutions are rare and invariably contested according to which 'side' is affected. A majority of Sinn Féin voters (57 per cent) back a truth

and reconciliation commission but this seems impossible to achieve. Only 12 per cent of DUP voters support amnesties for acts of violence committed during the Troubles.

Amid the belligerence and wrangling, public support for devolved government remained extensive. 70 per cent of the electorate wanted the Assembly and Executive restored, with cross-community majorities in favour. Yet only 27 per cent of voters believed that unionists and nationalists have cooperated well in the Assembly. Relationships between the DUP and Sinn Fein had deteriorated since the halcyon 'Chuckle Brother' days of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness and the pragmatic and business-like dealings of Peter Robinson and McGuinness. Michelle O'Neill, McGuinness's successor as Sinn Fein leader in Northern Ireland, declared she would not work alongside Arlene Foster, who was entitled to be First Minster based on the DUP's Assembly mandate. Both Foster and O' Neill benefited from unionist and nationalist intransigence which helped mobilise supporters. On the biggest turnout since 2005, the DUP rallied most pro-Union voters and Sinn Féin proved utterly dominant within nationalism. Foster and O'Neill were popular leaders among their own ranks and regarded with hostility by the other side. Asked to rate the DUP leader on a zero to ten scale, where ten is the highest possible regard, the most common score from DUP voters placed Foster at ten, whilst 62 per cent of Sinn Féin voters placed her at zero. More significantly in terms of the intra-communal battle, Foster was held in reasonably high regard by the remaining supporters of the party she quit to join the DUP in 2003, with three-quarters of UUP voters rating her at five or above. Anathema towards the DUP leader from Sinn Féin's base was heartily reciprocated by DUP backers. Asked to rate Michelle O'Neill, the largest single category awarded by DUP voters was zero, 42 per cent placing the Sinn Fein northern leader in this negative bracket.

Bereft of Westminster representation (a repeat of 2010-15) the future of the UUP appears uncertain. The party's very modest revival after the electoral calamities of the post-Good Friday Agreement era (when the DUP prospered by opposing a deal they eventually effectively signed up to) was ended in 2017 and there are no clear indicators as to how the UUP can claw back the support lost to the DUP. It was bitterly ironic for the UUP to witness the DUP reap the rewards of a deal with the Conservatives. From the 1920s until the 1970s, the UUP had taken the Conservative whip at Westminster. The old alliance was revived at the 2010 election by the Conservative leader, David Cameron and the UUP leader, Reg Empey, under the cumbersome title of Ulster Conservatives and Unionists New Force (UCUNF) but yielded no UUP seats.

On the nationalist side, the 43 years of continuous Westminster representation enjoyed by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) were ended, perhaps never to return. Like the UUP, the SDLP had delivered the Good Friday Agreement but ever since then has appeared as a party with its best idea now behind it and a less clear manifesto for the future. The years since the Good Friday Agreement have seen a transformation in intra-bloc election fortunes, one difficult to see being reversed. The UUP and SDLP are ageing parties struggling to articulate ideas and visions since the big power-sharing deal of 1998, a consociational deal which reinforced the ethnic identities strongly articulated by the DUP and Sinn Féin. Those ethnic tribune parties (see Mitchell, Evans and O'Leary 2009) are seen as the stouter custodians of ethnic interests even though they have moderated their political agendas over the last two decades. A majority of electors – and even 31 per cent of UUP voters - concurred that the DUP had been the more effective party for unionists.

The outcome of the election indicated continuing 'Balkanisation' of Northern Ireland. Its south and west are predominantly Irish nationalist, the British Unionist population confined, in Westminster representation terms, to the north-eastern corner. If partition was occurring today, the contours of the border might be very different. Ironically, however, Brexit may reinvigorate a largely invisible border along its original territorial marking. Although the DUP wants a seamless border along with the British and Irish governments, it also opposes membership of the EU single market and customs union and refuses to countenance special status for Northern Ireland. The election showed little evidence of remorse from the DUP's support base over their stance. At the 2016 Brexit referendum, 70 per cent of DUP voters backed departure from the EU (Garry 2016). At the 2017 General Election, 66 per cent of voters endorsed this stance. Sinn Féin' supporters had largely not altered their views either. In 2016, only 14 per cent backed EU withdrawal (Garry 2016); 15 per cent advocated this course in 2017.

Beyond communal grandstanding, the DUP used its election manifesto to emphasise its more left-wing economic agenda, often ignored amid the concentration upon the party's hardline constitutional approach and moral strictures (Democratic Unionist Party 2017). The DUP made clear its opposition to the ending of the triple lock on pensions and opposed any means-testing of winter fuel allowances for pensioners. Meanwhile, Sinn Fein campaigned on three core issues: 'No Brexit, No Border, No Tory cuts' and demanded 'designated special status for the North within the EU' and 'continued political representation for the north of Ireland within the EU parliament' (Sinn Féin 2017: 4). Yet neither Sinn Féin's Westminster election manifesto, nor the party's Assembly election manifesto earlier that year, made mention of a border poll, despite the calls for such from the party leadership in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote. Unless such a vote was conducted on an all-island basis, in which a close

result might ensue, Sinn Féin would surely not achieve a majority for a united Ireland. Within the confines of Northern Ireland, 52 per cent of 2017 Westminster election voters said they would support the constitutional status quo in the event of a poll, with 27 per cent declaring in favour of a united Ireland. Only 18 per cent of the electorate believed Brexit made a united Ireland more likely.

Although generating much passion among some voters, moral or social issues did not feature highly in explanations of party choice. Among DUP voters, more favoured the legalisation of same-sex marriage (44 per cent) than opposed (42 per cent). True, the figure in favour of legalisation were substantially below that found among Sinn Féin voters, of 66 per cent, but it does indicate that the DUP's support base is less vexed over the issue than the DUP's membership, 65 per cent of which believed that 'homosexuality is wrong' a few years earlier (Tonge et al. 2014) and who shared the view of one DUP elected representative, the Assembly member Jim Wells, that 'Peter will not marry Paul in Northern Ireland' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 21 April 2017). Among 2017 election voters, age was a more significant variable than party choice in terms of attitudes to same-sex marriage. Only 7 per cent of 18 to 24 years old voters opposed the legalisation of such unions, whereas only 31 per cent of those aged 65 and over were in favour. Social conservatism was far from the exclusive preserve of DUP voters. Indeed, a higher percentage of DUP voters (41 per cent) supported the legalisation of abortion than do Sinn Féin voters (32 per cent).

The DUP were labelled as 'dinosaurs' by critics for their hostility to same-sex marriage and abortion. However, whilst the DUP's social conservatism was thought a possible deterrent to younger voters, 32 per cent of 18 to 24 years old voters backed the DUP, only five per cent

below the party's overall percentage, with 26 per cent supporting Sinn Féin. That said, two-thirds of electors in that age category did not vote, the majority unionist or nationalist labels. A majority of 18 to 24 years old Protestants indicated pro-Union views but could not support traditional unionist parties.

The DUP's blocking of same-sex marriage in the Northern Ireland Assembly, using a Petition of Concern which requires cross-community support for a measure, attracted much hostility from those favouring change. It might be recalled, however, that more Conservative MPs voted against the legalisation of same-sex marriage than voted in favour when England and Wales moved to change the law. Moreover, opposition to abortion straddles the unionist and nationalist blocs in Northern Ireland, with the DUP and the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) most opposed to liberalisation. Most importantly of all though, the DUP's interest lies in preserving prohibitions in Northern Ireland, not imposing its beliefs beyond the region.

The consequences of the result

The result was palpably a dream scenario for the DUP. As the monopoly supplier of allies for the Conservatives, Foster's party could name its price for propping up a government stripped of its overall majority in the House of Commons. A 'confidence-and-supply' deal between the Conservatives and the DUP was confirmed 18 days after the election. The DUP agreed to support the Conservative government in key votes, such as the Queen's Speech, Budget, Brexit and anti-terrorism legislation, in addition to votes of confidence, whilst retaining the right to vote against the government on other issues. In return, the DUP, well-prepared for its pivotal role, extracted a high financial price from the government, to meet its own

priorities. Despite some excitable commentary, the DUP had no interest in extending its opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion. The initial demands of the DUP upon the Conservatives also excluded loyalist cultural concerns, such as those around Protestant parades. The 'coalition of crackpots' (*Daily Mirror*, 9 June 2017: 1) thus turned out to be a pragmatic parliamentary arrangement, limited in scope, although the areas covered were crucial to the government's survival.

The DUP had long known what it wanted from a minority government. In anticipation of a hung parliament after the 2015 election, the party had produced a detailed 'shopping list'. The Northern Ireland Plan contained 45 items, two-thirds of which were financial (Democratic Unionist Party 2015). In 2017, the focus was again financial. The price for the DUP's parliamentary support was approximately £1 billion in new funding for Northern Ireland for two years, amounting to £550 per head in the region and effectively valuing each DUP MP at £100m. The extra money given to Northern Ireland included £400m for infrastructure projects, £200m to improve health services and £150m for ultra-fast broadband. This additional funding was on top of the £2.5bn of support offered by the British Government to underwrite the Stormont House and Fresh Start Agreements, reached in 2014 and 2015 respectively to bolster Northern Ireland's devolved government, but which had little beneficial effect in furthering political progress.

The DUP's mildly leftist economic agenda contributed to the dropping of Conservative plans to cut the cost of state benefits. The confidence and supply agreement declared 'that both parties have agreed' to support the maintenance of the status quo on pensions and winter fuel allowances (HM Government 2017a: 2). Precisely how much of this can be attributed to the DUP is uncertain. Fears of Conservative backbench rebellions and adverse electoral

impacts may have been as influential as the DUP view. Nonetheless, there was a certain irony in the DUP taking the Conservatives to the left, given much of the initial media commentary on the Tories' new allies, which (unsurprisingly) focused on the party's hardline and controversial views. Three months after the election, the DUP supported a Labour Opposition parliamentary motion demanding the ending of the public sector pay cap, further indication that the party would resist the Conservatives in areas beyond where an alliance had been agreed.

In concentrating upon the cash not the (Orange) sash, the DUP played an astute hand. The financial benefits were cross-community and did not appear to challenge the rigorous impartiality between the unionist and nationalist communities required of the UK government under the Good Friday Agreement. The financial award was not explicitly conditional upon the restoration of a devolved executive although it was designed to incentive its return. The additional finance was justified on the basis that the government 'recognises the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland's history and the effect that this has had on its economy and people from all parts of the community' (HM Government 2017a) as if the Conservatives had no previous knowledge the region's difficulties. In 2015-16, the £10,983 spend per head for Northern Ireland's citizens exceeded that per head in England by more than £2,000 (Keep 2016: 5) a differential now increased amid the bypassing of the Barnett Formula.

Confronted by the Conservative-DUP axis at Westminster, Sinn Féin faced a difficult decision whether to return to the Northern Ireland Executive as a counterweight, or to at least spend any money that the DUP managed to obtain from the Conservative Government. A return to direct rule from Westminster would collapse the delicate institutional machinery constructed

in the Good Friday Agreement and maintained (with difficulty and episodic hiatuses) ever since. Sinn Féin dismissed any prospect of an end to its policy of abstention from Westminster. Although participation would make the parliamentary arithmetic even more difficult for the Conservatives, the swearing of an oath of allegiance to a British monarch would breach republican principles and divide a party within which a two-thirds majority would be needed for such a major change.

The DUP is likely to prove a solid and reliable voting bloc for the Conservatives on the issues where its support is pledged. Its members do not engage in dissent and rebellion against their party whip. The parliamentary risk comes from the Conservative backbenches not the DUP. The transfer of large sums of money to Northern Ireland is hardly unknown and the sum agreed is a fraction of the cost of the subvention during the Troubles. This notwithstanding, an obvious issue was whether the DUP's ten MPs would act as Oliver Twists, asking for more money at a later date.

The most important role played by the DUP may be in supporting Brexit. The party also favours departure from the Single Market and the Customs Union and opposes special status for Northern Ireland, yet wants a soft border dividing Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These positions may be mutually exclusive as tariff and regulatory checks are the logical consequence of having one part of the island of Ireland inside the EU Customs Union and the other outside. The DUP's functionality may be in joining forces with the UK and Irish governments in persuading the EU to facilitate a bespoke favourable deal, although this is only in the EU's gift. Meanwhile, the text of part of Strand Two of the Good Friday Agreement (the all-island dimension) was rendered redundant because of Brexit, being constructed upon assumptions of joint UK-Irish government membership.

In terms of Northern Ireland conflict issues, there was a hint, in the final paragraph ('Legacy') of the deal with the Conservatives, of one of the DUP's concerns. The paragraph insisted that conflict legacy bodies must not 'unfairly focus on former members of the armed forces or police' (HM Government 2017b: 4). The DUP perception is that there is a disproportionately high focus upon British state actions during the Northern Ireland Troubles, but this claim is contested by Irish republicans who highlight the very low number of convictions of British forces. The DUP's 2015 Northern Ireland Plan demanded that serving and retired members of the Armed Forces be given protected status and called for a UK wide definition of a victim which excludes perpetrators of violence.

There are other potential controversies, if the DUP veers from the 'cash to the sash' and attempts to address Loyalist cultural concerns evident amongst the Party's support base. Most notably, it remains DUP policy to replace the Parades Commission, the quasi-judicial body which regulates marches in Northern Ireland and has re-routed or restricted some Protestant Orange Order parades. Most DUP members oppose the Parades Commission and the DUP leader, Arlene Foster, views the Commission as dysfunctional. The DUP may also demand the removal of the allowances paid to Sinn Féin's abstentionist Westminster MP.

For the DUP, operating in the hermetically sealed dual ethnic bloc voting system of Northern Ireland, there is only a modest electoral risk accruing to a relationship with the Conservatives. The arrangement is readily sellable to the DUP membership, who favour the Conservatives to Labour by seven-to-one (Tonge et al 2014) - a viewpoint unlikely to change under a Corbyn Labour leadership. It seems, for now at least, a very popular deal among DUP voters, 96 per cent of whom endorsed the arrangement. In contrast, 90 per cent of Sinn Féin voters opposed the DUP-Conservative link-up.

The DUP has come under much greater scrutiny since it attained its pivotal position. The focus upon policy differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK has already led to change which the party, whilst not overly concerned given its focus upon its own region, would not greatly welcome. The first clear example was the adoption by the government of the Labour backbencher Stella Creasy's demand that women travelling from Northern Ireland to have an abortion (where it is illegal except where the mother's life is at risk) to elsewhere in the UK should have their costs met by the state.

The DUP's near insulation from electoral pressure, even if the alliance with the Conservatives does not yield more fruit, is accompanied by the option to walk away in the unlikely event the deal turns toxic among the unionist electorate. Given the DUP's slender one-seat Assembly lead over Sinn Féin, an unpopular alliance could be costly if there was to be yet another Assembly election. Whilst on current electoral evidence there is little prospect of the UUP stealing a swathe of DUP seats, it would only take minor DUP losses for Sinn Féin to become the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly, thus providing the First Minister – if there is an Executive and Assembly in place.

Conclusion

The 2017 General Election confirmed the dominance of the DUP and Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland and more broadly gave the DUP unprecedented influence in UK politics. As the unique supplier of additional parliamentary votes, the party knew a very good financial deal could be extracted from the needy Conservatives. For the Conservatives, the DUP provides a necessary and helpful ally, one with the parliamentary voting discipline crucial given the government's minority status. The Conservatives happily restated loudly their unionist credentials to please

their new allies. As the Prime Minister emphasised on the morning after the election, there is a clue in her party's title. She leads the Conservative *and Unionist* Party.

To maximise its advantage, the DUP kept its focus economic and did not demand anything exclusively for the unionist community. This partially allayed fears that the Good Friday Agreement's demand for 'rigorous impartiality' was breached by a Conservative-DUP alliance. However. that Agreement (never formally supported by the DUP anyway) was in trouble. The power-sharing institutions created under Strand One were struggling to be reconstituted and parts of Strand Two made little sense in the context of Brexit. Few voters and no parties wanted direct rule from Westminster and only a minority of Northern Ireland's citizens desired Brexit, but the former remained a possibility and latter a probability.

The DUP and Sinn Féin continued to contest the policies a devolved Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly ought to pursue and the Westminster election was merely an exercise in highlighting the polarity of their views on Brexit, an Irish Language Act, same-sex marriage, how to deal with the past (which appears impossible given the difficulty in handling the present) and of course Northern Ireland's long-term constitutional future. As an exercise in confirming DUP and Sinn Féin communal hegemony, the election served its purpose. It also placed the DUP in a pivotal position at Westminster regardless of what happened next in Belfast. For Sinn Féin, abstention from Westminster remained part of its lingering fundamentalism. The question begged by the election fallout was whether an Irish republican party would return to government in Belfast to help spend the extra money obtained by a unionist party from a Conservative government at Westminster.

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Figure 9.1

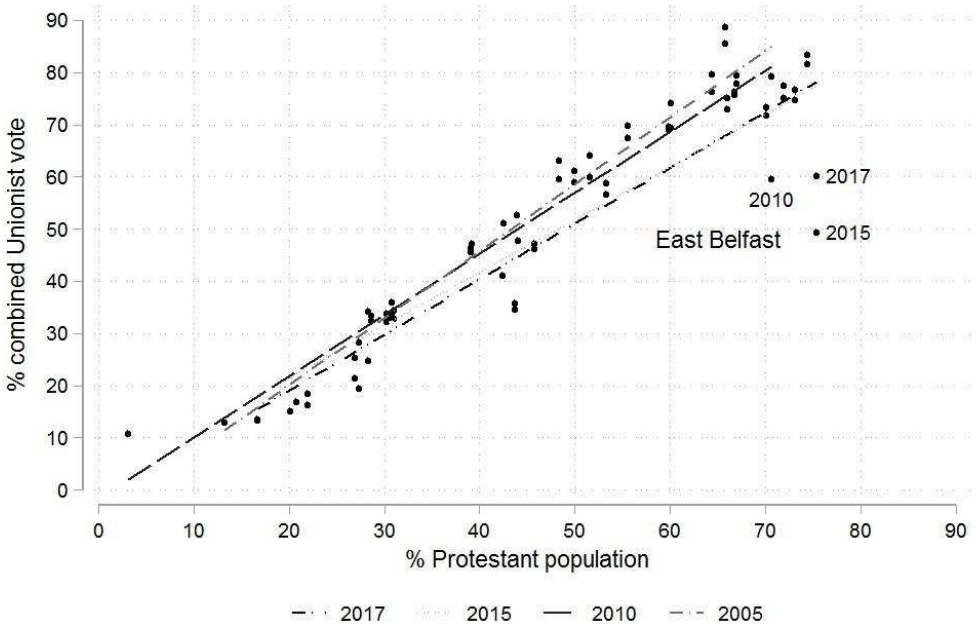
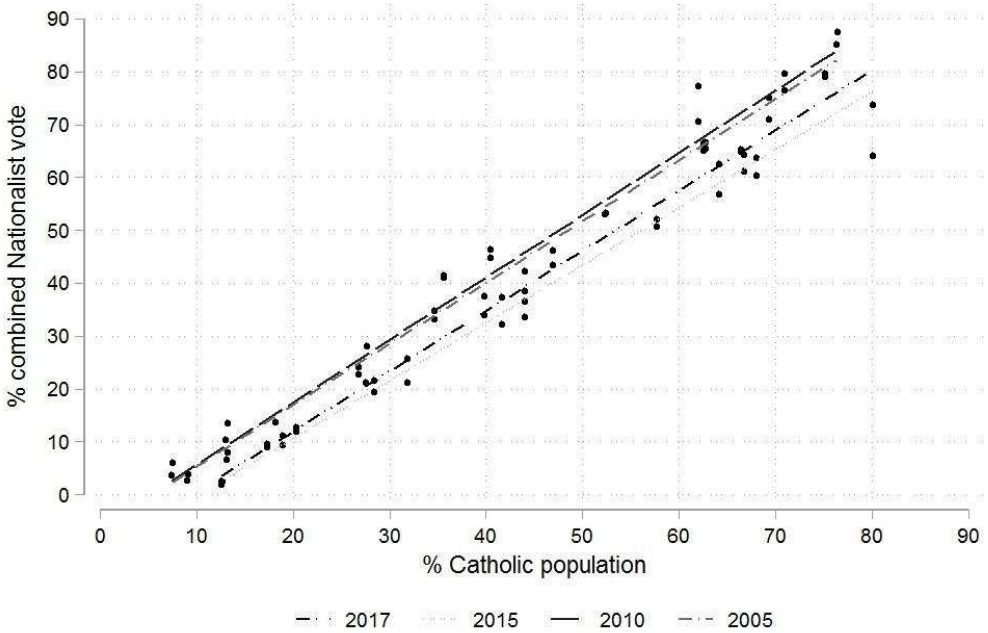


Figure 9.2



Notes

[1] The 2017 Northern Ireland general election study is available at https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=8234&type=Data%20catalogue
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