**The General Election in Northern Ireland: the path back to devolved power-sharing**

**Results**

Northern Ireland’s election contained plenty of drama (again) and had important consequences. For the first time, only a minority of MPs elected to Westminster from Northern Ireland are now unionists. Nine nationalists won seats, seven from Sinn Fein (SF) who refuse to take their seats and two from the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). 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 Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) – once dominant – failed to win a seat for the third time in the last four elections.

In an election dominated by Brexit and marked by nationalist and unionist pacts, labelled as pro-Remain on the nationalist side, 4 of the 18 seats changed hands, with two SDLP gains and one each for Alliance and Sinn Féin, although Sinn Féin’s net haul was unchanged. The English electorate’s decisive endorsement of the “Boris Brexit” may have long-term implications for the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The immediate impact of the Conservatives’ substantial majority, however, was to marginalise Northern Ireland MPs. The DUP’s days in the Westminster sun, under the confidence-and-supply deal which provided the Conservatives with a majority in the last parliament, were over. Attention turned to the local power base in the Northern Ireland Assembly, suspended since January 2017 when Sinn Fein quit but restored within one month of the 2019 general election. The absence of Westminster power appeared to concentrate minds.

Table 1 shows the general election results.

**Table 1 The Northern Ireland General Election result 2019**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | % VOTE | % CHANGE FROM 2017 | SEATS | SEAT CHANGE FROM 2017 |
| DUP | 30.6 | -5.4 | 8 | -2 |
| SF | 22.8 | -6.7 | 7 |  - |
| Alliance | 16.8 | +8.8 | 1 | +1 |
| SDLP | 14.9 | +3.1 | 2 | +2 |
| UUP | 11.7 | +1.4 | 0 |  0 |
| Others |  3.2 | -1.5 | 1 |  -1 |

The DUP had a tough defence to mount, having won a record haul ten seats in 2017. Its vote share fell in all bar one constituency and the party was reduced to 8 MPs, losing two of its three Belfast seats, including that of Westminster leader Nigel Dodds. Sinn Fein’s return of 7 included the notable Dodds scalp but the party’s vote share fell everywhere else. The SDLP regained the Westminster representation it lost in 2017. Party leader Colum Eastwood thrashed Sinn Fein to retake Foyle and Claire Hanna triumphed easily in South Belfast, so two nationalist voices are now heard in the Commons.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the results was the rise from fifth to third place, in vote share, of the Alliance Party, which repudiates unionism and nationalism. Alliance gained North Down with 45% of the vote in a constituency where the party’s 2017 share was a mere 9%. Alliance’s overall 9% general election increase in vote share added to the party’s 11% European and 5% council election increases in 2019. Alliance improved its vote share in 17 of the 18 constituencies. With some survey evidence indicating those rejecting unionist or nationalist labels now outnumber those who do identify as such, by 50% to 26% and 21% respectively, Alliance has a large and growing electoral reservoir in which to fish (Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2018).

Table 2 shows the seats which fell into new hands, the changes in vote share and the main electoral pacts between parties.

**Table 2 Northern Ireland seats changing hands 2019**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2017  | 2019 | Winning majority | Change 2017-2019  |  Main Pacts? |
| North Belfast | DUP | SF | 1,943 | SF + 5.4%DUP - 3.1%  | UUP stood aside for DUP.SDLP stood aside for SFGreens did not contest |
| South Belfast | DUP | SDLP | 15,401 | SDLP +31.3%DUP - 5.7% | SF stood aside for SDLPGreens did not contest |
| North Down | Independent (retired) | Alliance |  2,968 | Alliance +35.9% | Greens, SF, SDLP did not contest |
| Foyle | SF | SDLP |  | SDLP + 17.7%SF - 19.0% | N/A |

**Brexit pacts and economic and constitutional futures**

The election campaign featured rows over Brexit-related pacts, also 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. 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 exact opposite at their party conference one year earlier.

Amid much derision aimed at the DUP for its pro-Brexit strategy resulting in a Brexit it did not like, the election was marked by ‘Remain pacts”, as the SDLP stood aside for Sinn Fein in North Belfast and Sinn Fein reciprocated in the south of the city, whilst the Greens also stood aside in several constituencies. The arrangement helped Sinn Féin to unseat the DUP’s Nigel Dodds, whilst the SDLP gained South Belfast from the DUP, although with such a large winning margin a pact seemed superfluous.

The DUP complained that Remain pacts were “pan-nationalist” fronts, thinly veiled anti-DUP decapitation tactics. Previously the SDLP had refused to step aside for Sinn Féin given the latter’s refusal to take Westminster seats. 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.

Ironically. unionist parties were even more opposed to Boris Johnson’s form of Brexit than parties which had always supported Remain. The nationalist argument was that the DUP had acted as midwife to Brexit and so deserved electoral sanction. Northern Ireland voted by 56% to 44% to stay in the EU and most citizens favoured the softest of borders on the island of Ireland. Increased friction for trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland was the price to be paid, but this was unacceptable to some unionists.

Boris Johnson’s bespoke Brexit deal detaches Northern Ireland economically from the rest of the UK. Northern Ireland will remain attached to the rest of Ireland and the EU for regulatory standards and, in most respects, customs. There will be checks on goods heading from Britain to Northern Ireland, treated effectively as exports, to ensure compliance with EU standards and to ensure EU tariffs are applied. Traders can apply for reimbursement if their goods remain in the UK. The sum of the parts is arguably an embryonic economic united Ireland. Although many unionists supported Brexit, they oppose these terms, fearing they could tee up a constitutional united Ireland.

During the election campaign, Northern Ireland’s unionists and loyalists organized several well-attended rallies in opposition to the prime minister’s Brexit deal. The sense of betrayal was understandable given that Johnson’s Brexit, with its semi-detachment of Northern Ireland via ,effectively, a border in the Irish Sea, involves terms that Johnson told the 2018 DUP conference “no British Conservative government could or should sign up to” .

**A Border Poll?**

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 has shifted sufficiently to make it a possibility. Supporters of Irish unity can play a long game. If a border poll is lost, another can be called seven years later.

Of 12 opinion surveys conducted in Northern Ireland on the border issue since the 2016 EU referendum, 9 have shown more people opposed to a united Ireland than in favour. However, the margins have varied considerably, ranging from 41% to 3% and two of the three most recent polls showed more in support of unity than against. The general trend suggests growing support for unity, even though many are not yet persuaded. All polls indicate a sizeable number of don’t knows who would need to be won over.

At the general election, the combined support for nationalist and republican parties—those that favour a united Ireland—totalled 39 percent, whereas the combined unionist vote amounted to 42 percent. Nationalist parties were similarly outpolled in first preference votes in both the 2019 council and European elections, by 44 percent to 36 percent each time. So, in terms of real votes, a united Ireland still looks distant, even though unionists have lost their overall seat majorities at both Westminster and Stormont. The real shift has been towards the constitutionally neutral Alliance Party, whose support base comprises border agnostics whose support is needed by the pro-unionist or pro-unity cause.

There is disagreement among unionists over whether to engage in discussions on Irish unity. For some, being complicit in the possible dissolution of their own country is unacceptable. The more pragmatic argue that planning is needed, to avoid a scenario akin to that following the Brexit vote, when the lack of a template led to political chaos. Former DUP leader Peter Robinson has counselled that unionists should, as a precaution, discuss their future inside a united Ireland and consider how to be meaningfully represented in all-Ireland political structures (*Belfast Telegraph*, 3rd August 2018).

**The return of power-sharing**

The most striking consequence of the election was the return of the Northern Ireland Assembly and devolved power-sharing. This was predictable from the moment the Conservatives’ substantial victory became apparent, a position consolidated by DUP and Sinn Fein election underperformance. The DUP’s once-pivotal Westminster role was gone. The influence of Northern Ireland’s MPs in the Commons is likely to be slight. Sinn Fein remain absent anyway, declining to swear an oath of allegiance to a British monarch. The fall in vote shares of the DUP and Sinn Fein at the general election appeared punishment for their failure to agree a devolved government since 2017. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland indicated he would call Assembly elections if cross-party agreement for restoration could not be found. The DUP and Sinn Fein may have seen these as risky and the latter also hoped to benefit in the looming Irish election from doing a deal in the North. No party desired local powerlessness, which would be the outcome if direct rule from Westminster was introduced eventually if there was still no deal. The public still wanted a devolved Executive taking local decisions, not least because of the scale of the Northern Ireland’s health crisis which had developed amid an absence of ministerial direction. Some contentious issues had been dealt with at Westminster, which had legalised same-sex marriage and abortion in Northern Ireland. The sum of all these parts made a return to devolved government almost inevitable.

Across the party election manifestos, there was much consensus over the need for a reconstituted, reformed Assembly, all desiring a reduction in legislative vetoes and promoting joined-up government. The deal that emerged from the British and Irish governments was cash-rich but the extent of change from previous Assembly arrangements appeared modest. Irish language and UIster-Scots provisions were introduced, with a commissioner for each. An “Office of Identity and Cultural Expression” was established. These arrangements looked remarkably similar 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 the substantive powers. 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.

**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 Fein 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, which was quickly restored as all parties recognised the need for a local power base. The deal was smoothed with extensive financial promises to address mounting local crises in services, notably health. 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, eschewing unionist and nationalist ideologies. Despite this, the revived Assembly is still based largely upon the old Good Friday Agreement rules, based mainly on the old unionist versus nationalist faultline. Finally, the shift towards Irish economic unity under a bespoke Brexit for Northern Ireland is likely to ensure 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 at present and next year unionists will celebrate the centenary of Northern Ireland. A bicentennial party may be improbable though.

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