**Beyond unionism versus nationalism: The rise of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland**

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**Keywords**

Northern Ireland, centre ground, unionism, nationalism

**Abstract**

Northern Ireland has always been a polity noted for its strong links between national identity, religion and voting and acute British unionist versus Irish nationalist divisions. The constitutional question whether Northern Ireland should be part of the UK or a united Ireland dominates. Yet recent surveys have suggested a sizeable and growing section of its electorate declare itself neither unionist nor nationalist. This development may have assisted the growth of the centrist Alliance Party, which rejects unionist and nationalist identities and claims to be neutral on Northern Ireland’s constitutional status. Alliance doubled its vote across three elections in 2019 and is now the third largest party in the region. This article examines the importance of ideological dealignment relative to other factors such as Alliance’s opposition to Brexit in explaining the rise of a non-binary party in a divided society.

**Introduction**

Although politics in Northern Ireland has always been framed upon British unionist versus Irish nationalist divisions, the third most popular party in the polity is now one which eschews such identifications: the Alliance Party. Now trailing only the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin in the popular vote, Alliance rejects the traditional binary constitutional politics of support for Northern Ireland’s place in the UK versus backing for a united Ireland. Alliance instead claims neutrality on Northern Ireland's constitutional future. Having struggled for decades as a non-aligned party in a sharply divided political system, 2019 saw Alliance make significant advances. The party increased its vote share by 7% in the local elections, 11% in the European contest and 9% in the Westminster elections, gaining parliamentary representation in Westminster and Brussels (albeit temporarily in the latter given Brexit) and achieving a 65% increase in local government seats .The party’s vote shares of 19% in the European election and 17% in the Westminster contest represented record highs for a party averaging only a single digit percentage vote share since its foundation in 1970.

Centrist parties often struggle in political entities sharply divided by ethno-national rivalries. Yet perhaps Alliance’s rise ought not to surprise and might indicate thawing of longstanding enmities. Recent surveys have shown that the section of Northern Ireland’s electorate stating they are neither unionist nor nationalist is now larger than that identifying as unionist (NILT 2018, NIGE 2019). Historically, however, approximately 90% of the votes in Northern Ireland’s elections have been cast for unionist or nationalist parties. This article uses data from the 2019 Northern Ireland election survey (NIGE 2019) to examine how and why a non-unionist, non-nationalist party has finally advanced.[[1]](#endnote-1) The piece assesses the broader significance of a party which is not a product of traditional ideologies trying to operate within a political system based upon a unionist versus nationalist fracture.

**The 2019 Alliance breakthrough**

The arrival of Alliance might be considered one of the longest gestations in political history. Although the party began its electoral life promisingly, achieving 14% of the vote in the 1973 local elections, subsequent years illuminated the difficulty of offering non-binary politics in a binary polity. From 1974 until the party’s 2019 successes, Alliance was marooned on a modest 7% average vote share. Table 1 summarises Alliance Party election performances since the party’s creation.

**Table 1 Alliance average election percentage vote shares by decade, 1970s-2019**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Election | 1970s | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s | 2010-18 | 2019 |
| Local | 14 | 9 | 7 | 5 | 7 | 12 |
| Westminster | 7 | 10 | 8 | 4 | 8 | 17 |
| Assembly | 9\* | 9\* | 7\* | 5 | 8 | N/A |
| European | 7\* | 5 | 3 | 6\* | 7\* | 19 |

NB: First preference votes only. Excludes by-elections. \*denotes only one such election contested. Source: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/election/elect.htm>

Alliance was regarded as a well-meaning but ineffectual and inconsequential party of the affluent liberal middle-class, with a geographically concentrated membership and support based in the wealthier parts of Greater Belfast largely immune from the worst of Northern Ireland’s conflict (Evans and Tonge 2003).

Yet three elections in 2019 saw major advancement. The party attracted more than 300,000 voters in total, averaged a 16% vote share and gained 62,000 votes between the 2017 and 2019 general elections. In the European election, the Alliance Party’s leader, Naomi Long, was one of three candidates elected (briefly) to the European Parliament. At the previous European contest in 2014, Alliance trailed in sixth place, with only 44,432 first preference votes. In 2019, however, the party’s first preference vote rocketed to 105,928. Moreover, Alliance proved highly transfer-friendly from across the sectarian divide under the PR-STV system. By the time of her election at the fifth count, Long had amassed 170,000 votes.

At the General election, Alliance’s share of the vote rose in 17 of Northern Ireland’s 18 parliamentary constituencies. Several vote share increases were spectacular. Alliance gained North Down with 45% of the vote. In 2017, the party’s share of the constituency was a mere 9%. Alliance also came second in three constituencies. Meanwhile, the combined vote share of the largest two parties, the DUP and Sinn Fein fell by 12%. A single seat for Alliance at Westminster is unlikely to yield much influence: ditto the party’s solitary place within the Northern Ireland Executive and eight Assembly seats (won in 2017). The significance of Alliance’s rise lies in its potential to recast Northern Ireland’s unionist versus nationalist electoral competition via the establishment of a strong third electoral bloc of the non-aligned.

**Where is Alliance’s support coming from?**

Unsurprisingly given its ideology. Alliance does well among that section of the electorate who say they are neither unionist nor nationalist. Half of that section declined to vote at the 2019 general election but among those that did, Alliance outscored its closest challenger by two-to-one.

Although Alliance was well placed to attract votes from disaffected liberal unionists opposed to Brexit, defections from those who had voted for the Ulster Unionist Party at the previous General Election provided only 3% of the supporters of Naomi Long’s party at the 2019 contest. This was a much smaller rate of desertion than the 18% shifting from the DUP at the previous contest and the 12% from Sinn Fein. Former SDLP voters provided another 5%, whilst 8% of Alliance’s voters had not voted in the 2017 election.

Indeed, Alliance garnered the support of a quarter of all those who had not voted in 2017, indicating a capacity to mobilise the previously disenchanted or disenfranchised. The party has the youngest voter base, with half aged 45 and under and has an evenly divided support in terms of gender. The support of the main unionist and nationalist parties is hugely religiously skewed. Catholics will not vote for unionist parties and Protestants avoid nationalist parties. Yet as Table 2 shows, Alliance supporters are drawn from both main religious communities, with its percentage support among those of no religion comfortably exceeding that of the other main parties.

**Table 2. Voting by Main Religions and No Religion 2019 Northern Ireland General Election (%)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| PARTY | CATHOLICS | PROTESTANTS | NO RELIGION |
| DUP | 0 | 54 | 16 |
| UUP | 0 | 24 | 10 |
| SF | 51 | 0 | 6 |
| SDLP | 28 | 1 | 15 |
| ALLIANCE | 13 | 17 | 30 |
| OTHER | 8 | 4 | 23 |

Source: NIGE (2019).

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. It was once said that to be middle-class in Northern Ireland was not necessarily to be Alliance but to be Alliance was to be middle-class. Yet at the general election, one-third of the party’s support came from the working-class. The party’s leader is viewed as less divisive than other political leaders. Naomi Long was viewed by electors as the most popular – or least unpopular – leader of the five main parties. Her mean rating, of 4.81, where zero represented ‘don’t rate at all’ and ten ‘rate very highly’, exceeded the score of her closest rival by almost half a point. Nationalists tend to hold the Alliance leader and the party more generally in more regard than do unionists, surprisingly liking Alliance as much as those who holding neither a unionist nor nationalist ideology, the party’s natural repository of sympathy. Alliance’s anti-Brexit stance has helped (85% of nationalists opposed Brexit) as has its changed image, from liberal, ‘small u’ unionist to more constitutionally neutral. In 2012, Alliance offices were attacked by loyalists after the party voted with Sinn Féin and the SDLP to end the permanent flying of the Union flag above Belfast city hall. However, as Table 3 shows, the most common attitude towards Alliance, given its ‘neither unionist not nationalist’ position, is neutrality – neither liking nor disliking.

**Table 3. Attitudes towards the Alliance Party by ideology (%)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Unionist | Nationalist | Neither Unionist nor Nationalist | Total |
| Strongly Like | 3.9 | 5.9 | 7.7 | 6.0 |
| Like | 19.3 | 28.5 | 28.0 | 25.5 |
| Neither Like nor Dislike | 35.7 | 33.9 | 33.9 | 34.5 |
| Dislike | 15.6 | 12.4 | 10.0 | 12.4 |
| Strongly Dislike | 17.2 | 7.7 | 3.7 | 8.8 |
| Don’t know/Refused | 8.3 | 11.6 | 16.7 | 12.8 |

Source: NIGE (2019).

**Explaining Alliance’s 2019 rise: temporal and long-term factors**

There are two broad categories of explanation of the Alliance Party’s electoral surge. One is the contextual factors pertaining to the elections in 2019. The second is the broader political trend of ideological dealignment within Northern Ireland.

The key contextual issues aiding Alliance were those of Brexit and the absence of a devolved Northern Ireland Assembly, mothballed since Sinn Féin walked out in 2017 amid controversies over the DUP’s role in the governing executive. Alliance’s target voters amounted to a considerable spread of Northern Ireland’s electors, given developments in 2016 and 2017. There was, firstly, the 56% of voters who had rejected Brexit in the 2016 referendum. Alliance was unequivocally pro-Remain. The other target was the vast swathe of the population disaffected by the absence of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly since January 2017. Only 2% of electors were opposed to their restoration three years later, the low figure indicative of how voters had not lost faith in the institutions.

The return of devolved government within one month of the 2019 election was hastened by the poor performances of the DUP and Sinn Féin. As Northern Ireland’s biggest two parties, they were blamed by some voters for the Assembly’s collapse, which had precipitated an acute health crisis long before the onset of the Covid-19 virus. Parties seen as blameless in the Assembly debacle, the UUP, SDLP and Alliance, all saw their 2019 general election vote share increase but Alliance profited by far the most. Alliance voters were the most likely to place ‘Assembly restoration’ as one of their three most important election issues, alongside Brexit and the NHS. Supporters of unionist and nationalist parties placed constitutional issues higher.

The longer-term factor potentially aiding Alliance was the growth in the ideologically unaligned. The most recent (2018) Northern Ireland Life and Times survey found that half of the electorate declared they were neither unionist nor nationalist, 12% higher than the percentage of unionist identifiers and 15% above those stating they are nationalist. Two decades earlier, at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, only one-third of electors stated they were neither unionist nor nationalist, with unionism the most popular identification, at 40% and nationalism on 25% (NILT 1998, 2018). A more ideologically dealigned electorate offers possibilities for a party not associated with unionism or nationalism. So, what is different about Alliance that might allow the party to fish successfully in this large and growing reservoir of the ideologically detached?

**How is the Alliance Party different from the other main parties?**

Despite the growing importance of Alliance and what it represents in rejecting the old ethno-national divides, little is known about the party. The only book comes from an activist (Eggins 2015) and there are only three journal articles dedicated to the organisation (McAllister and Wilson 1978; Evans and Tonge 2003; Mitchell 2018). The focus within ethnically divided societies is upon their ethnic parties, not organisations attempting to break the sectarian logjam. An exception, Aaron Edwards’ (2009) study of the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), shows the scale of the task facing Alliance as the NILP melted amid sectarian polarisation. This has been the fate of other non-ethnic and civic parties attempting to break the mould, such as NI21 or the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition.

Alliance’s vision is one in which constitutional questions are displaced by ‘normal’ politics, based on issues beyond whether Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom or becomes part of a united Ireland. Alliance’s stresses a desire for a united community and integration within Northern Ireland, advocating ethnic-blind policies and insisting it is not an orange or green party. Alliance is so keen to protect its ‘brand’ as neither unionist nor nationalist that, alone among Northern Ireland’s largest five parties, the party refused to engage in election pacts with parties from either of those ideological traditions in 2019. This was despite coming under pressure to step aside for anti-Brexit candidates.

Alliance’s voters straddle the identity divide. Its 2019 general election backers self-identified as 31% British; 33% Irish and 26% Northern Irish. It is perhaps noteworthy, however, that Northern Irish is not the predominant identification of Alliance supporters. This is despite the party appearing keen to promote ‘Northern Irishness’ as a shared identity far more than unionist parties, which emphasise their Britishness and nationalist parties, which promote their Irish identity.

That a non-ethnic party has risen to prominence is a significant feat within a polity still framed upon unionist versus nationalist divisions. The essence of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement was that of conflict management between two rival communities, broadly Protestant Unionist British versus Catholic Irish Nationalist. A perspective that Northern Ireland is dominated by two separate but equal traditions and that parity of esteem between those traditions (not necessarily rapprochement) dominated the 1998 deal. Little attention has been paid to Alliance, the political centre ground, multi-ethnic parties or one community visions.

Alliance’s appeal is as a big tent for liberal unionists, moderate nationalists and those neither unionist nor nationalists, Although ‘neither unionist nor nationalist’ ideological identification is the most common, at 51% of Alliance voters, 23% say they are unionist and 17% nationalist. So, Alliance is not merely a repository for those taking a conscious decision to step beyond traditional ideological affiliations. It also attracts some votes from those content to align with unionism or nationalism but prepared to vote for Alliance either tactically or because the party is seen as more attractive than the parties representing unionism or nationalism.

It might also be noted that not Alliance voters are immune from the sectarianism afflicting Northern Ireland. More than one in five Alliance voters say they ‘would mind a lot’ (5%) or ‘a little’ (17%) if a close relative was to marry someone from a different religion, although the percentage who ‘would not mind at all’ is higher than for the other four main parties. Whilst eschewing constitutional politics, the party may eventually have to take a position on a border poll on a united Ireland. Presently, Alliance voters break 58% to 26% in favour of Northern Ireland remaining in the UK.

A further difficulty for Alliance is that it is obliged to operate within a consociational political system, framed around recognition and reinforcement of the ethno-national fracture that the party attempts to heal. Within the Northern Ireland Assembly, members are obliged to designate as unionist, nationalist or, for those not in those groups, simply as ‘other’. As a non-ethnic political party, Alliance struggles to bio-degrade a system which reifies binary – and, to critics, sectarian, politics.

The rules of the political game incorporate state ‘licencing’ of ethnic bloc power-sharing, in which two communities cooperate, each holding vetoes. Acknowledgement of centre parties operating outside the game’s rules, tends to be modest. There are significant barriers to progress for non-ethnic parties attempting to bridge the sectarian chasm. Conflictual ethnic groups are the recognised units, for which bloc representation is guaranteed under mandatory power-sharing. For parties promoting individual not group rights and backing inter-ethnic bridging rather than ethnic solidarity, there is less protection. To alter institutional dynamics, it may be necessary to grow electorally to such a point where the logic of ethnic bloc rule-setting is challenged.

Yet it is not always clear whether, in challenging binary structures, Alliance is attempting to *accommodate* existing affiliations or promote a common Northern Irishness to *overcome* British unionist and Irish nationalist identities. An unresolved dilemma is whether Alliance is essentially a multi-ethnic accommodationist civic party operating within an ethnic party system by appealing across the sectarian divides – a bridge across a chasm - or an integrationist civic party which rejects existing political structures and appeals mainly to non-ethnically aligned voters. Alliance oscillates between acting primarily as a political umbrella, a political shelter under which people of differing political ideologies and religious backgrounds and constitutional perspectives comfortably co-exist and a more radical vehicle, rejecting unionism and nationalism outright and viewing both as regressive entities needing to be usurped by a common identity (neutral Northern Irishness).

As noted above, Alliance gets much support from those who say they are neither unionist nor nationalist, but that was only a bare majority of the party’s general election support. Those who *do* identify as unionist or nationalist make up nearly as much of the party’s support. Is it possible to ride unionist and nationalist horses at the same time as rejecting them?

For civic, non-aligned parties such as Alliance, opposed to communal designations, there are two possible routers to a shared future. One is to come to an accommodation with the ethnocentric nature of the polity. This involves acting as a united but diverse, multi-ethnic repository for moderates on either of a divide, bringing them together to help encourage political compromises between ethnic bloc parties. The alternative is to adopt a transformational approach to attract those repudiating rival affiliations and to reject politics based primarily around group rights. Alliance rejects the idea that it ‘splits differences’ between unionism and nationalism, claiming to offer a radically different ideology. Instead, Alliance eschews electoral pacts with other parties, opposes dual provision, and rejects ethnic quotas or positive discrimination designed to enforce parity across the binary divide. Instead Alliance favours religion-blind policies.

**Conclusion**

Given the rise of Alliance amid the growth of non-binary identities in Northern Ireland the binary structures established in the immediate post-conflict era of the Good Friday Agreement might be questioned. The polity is no longer just about unionism versus nationalism but that is not reflected in how the political institutions and their rules are set up. Alliance’s recent election performances suggest that the reductionism in labelling an organisation as merely ‘others’ within the Assembly may need reappraisal.

The questions begged are whether Alliance can continue to grow as a centre party, reshape a binary divide and create new civic space, less predicated upon the old conflict model. At some point, Northern Ireland will need to de-sectarianise, at both institutional and societal level. An avowedly non-sectarian party may be better placed than parties drawing support from only one community. Overcoming Northern Ireland’s divisions appears a very hard task, nonetheless. Alliance needs to further convert indecision or indifference towards the party into endorsement. The part has to contend with the fact that those who say they are neither unionist nor nationalist remain far less likely to vote than those who do identify as such. Elections still tend to be contests of the true believers. A fine set of election results for Alliance does not change that. What Alliance’s gains do emphasise is that Northern Ireland’s electorate is about more than traditional political affiliations

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1. The ESRC Northern Ireland General Election involved face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of 2.003 electors across all 18 of the region’s parliamentary constituencies between 28th December 2019 and 11th February 2020. Fieldwork was undertaken by Social Market Research Belfast and the author was the Principal Investigator. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)