**Voting into a Void? The 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly Election**

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**Abstract**

The election to the Northern Ireland Assembly in May 2022 witnessed significant changes to the region’s political balance. For the first time, a nationalist party became the largest, Sinn Féin’s new leading position allowing the party to provide the First Minister. The main party of unionism, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was relegated to second place. This runner-up position entitled the party to nominate the Deputy First Minister. However, in the immediate aftermath of the election, the DUP declined to do so, amid a crisis for the political institutions established under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. According to the DUP, it would return to power-sharing with nationalists only upon removal of the European Union (EU) Protocol, agreed between the EU and UK government in 2019. The Protocol uniquely aligns Northern Ireland with EU rules and requires checks on goods travelling between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Alongside unionist versus nationalist rivalries however, the election was also marked by the best-ever performance by a party of the centre ground subscribing to neither ideology, as Alliance more than doubled its Assembly seat tally. It was now possible to speak of three big pillars in Northern Irish politics: unionist, nationalist and non-aligned, each dominated by a single party. This article examines what happened at the election, assessing the key issues and party fortunes.

**Keywords:** Northern Ireland, elections, unionism, nationalism, centrism, Protocol.

The 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election was marked by three developments. First, the contest completed the ascent of Sinn Fein from onetime minor IRA political outlet to Northern Ireland’s largest party, now entitled to supply the First Minister of a country whose title it preferred not to utter. Second, the election indicated considerable Unionist opposition to the EU Northern Ireland Protocol, the region’s distinctive Brexit, if measured in terms of votes for the anti-Protocol Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) The Protocol, aimed at preventing a hard trade border on the island of Ireland, requires that goods crossing from Great Britain to Northern Ireland be checked to ensure compliance with EU standards, given they are seen as at risk of entering the EU Single Market. Non-unionist parties support the Protocol but opposition from unionists delayed the return of devolved power-sharing political institutions post-election. Third, the outcome confirmed the continuing rise of the cross-community Alliance, now Northern Ireland’s third largest party. Alliance was the only party to gain seats, more than doubling its tally. The election results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 The Northern Ireland 2022 Assembly Election Result**

(change from 2017 Assembly election in brackets)

Seats FPV votes % Vote share

Sinn Féin (SF) 27 (nc) 250,338 (+26,143) 29.0 (+1.1)

Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) 25 (-3) 184,002 (-41,411) 21.3 (-6.7)

Alliance Party (APNI) 17 (+9) 116,681 (+43,694) 13.5 (+4.5)

Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) 9 (-1) 96,390 (-6,924) 11.2 (-1.7)

Social Democratic & Labour (SDLP) 8 (-4) 78,327 (-17,271) 9.1 (-2.9)

Independent Unionists 2 (+1) 13,549 (+8,631) 1.6 (+1.0)

Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) 1 (nc) 65,788 (+45,265) 7.6 (+5.1)

People Before Profit (PBP) 1 (nc) 9.798 (-4,302) 1.1 (-0.6)

As might be expected, Sinn Fein and the DUP had the highest percentages of their candidates elected, although Alliance’s share of success was not far behind, as indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2 Percentages of successful candidates by party, 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election**

Candidates Elected % elected

Sinn Féin 34 27 79.4

Democratic Unionist Party 30 25 83.3

Alliance Party 24 17 70.8

Ulster Unionist Party 27 9 33.3

Social Democratic & Labour Party 22 8 36.4

People Before Profit 12 1 8.3

Traditional Unionist Voice 19 1 5.2

Note: Excludes the two independent unionists elected.

The buoyancy of Sinn Féin’s vote can perhaps also be seen in Table 3. More than half of the party’s candidates did not require a later stage count to be elected. Alliance proved sufficiently vote transfer-friendly to get 15 of its 17 candidates elected between count stages two and ten. The DUP again also proved its adeptness at vote management. The party had the highest percentage of candidates elected, even though only two were returned on first count. Of the other 23 successful candidates, more than half were elected at the final stage. Final stage counts determined the outcome of 38 seats, as follows. Sinn Féin won 8, the DUP 12, Alliance 7, UUP 3, SDLP 5, PBP 1, TUV 1 and Independent Unionist 1.

**Table 3 Count stage at which candidates elected, 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Count stage | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| SF | 14 | 2 |  | 1 | 1 | 2 |  | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 |  |  |  |
| DUP | 2 |  |  | 2 | 6 | 5 | 3 | 2 |  | 3 | 1 |  |  | 1 |
| APNI | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |  | 2 | 3 | 3 | 1 |  |  |  |  |
| UUP | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |  | 1 | 1 |  | 2 |  | 1 |  |  |  |
| SDLP | 1 |  |  |  | 1 | 3 |  | 1 |  | 1 |  | 1 |  |  |
| TUV |  |  |  |  |  |  | 1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| PBP |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 1 |  |  |  |
| Ind U | 1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 1 |  |  |  |  |

When the post-election Executive is finally formed, based on number of Assembly seats, it will comprise Sinn Féin, with 4 seats, DUP 3, Alliance 2, UUP 1. The Assembly comprises 37 unionists (41%), 35 nationalists (39%) and 18 others (20%). Unionism lost its overall Stormont majority at the 2017 Assembly election and it seems unlikely to return.

**The continuing rise of Sinn Féin**

Sinn Fein’s 250,388 votes represented a record high for the party, a growth of more than 100,000 since the first Assembly election held in June 1998, immediately following the Good Friday Agreement. The movement from pariah to poll-topper began with the IRA ceasefires of the mid-1990s, prior to which the SDLP, always opposed to violence, had outpolled Sinn Féin by two-to-one among the Catholic nationalist population. Sinn Féin overtook the SDLP at the 2001 Westminster election and has been in the ascendancy ever since. 2022 represented a new Assembly low for the SDLP in both votes and seats. Sinn Fein’s domination of the intra-nationalist party battle and eclipse of the SDLP in Assembly elections is shown in the percentage bloc shares in Table 4.

**Table 4 Nationalist party bloc vote shares, Northern Ireland Assembly Elections 1998-2022**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Assembly Election | SDLP % share of the vote for nationalist parties | Sinn Féin % share of the vote for nationalist parties |
| 1998 | 55.6 | 44.4 |
| 2003 | 41.9 | 58.1 |
| 2007 | 36.3 | 62.3 |
| 2011 | 34.6 | 65.4 |
| 2016 | 33.3 | 66.7 |
| 2017 | 30.0 | 70.0 |
| 2022 | 22.8 | 72.9 |

NB: Percentages do not always total 100% because of the presence of other nationalist parties: Republican Sinn Féin (2007); Aontu, Irish Republican Socialist Party (2022). Figures exclude individual independent nationalist/republican candidates.

As lead nationalist party, Sinn Féin had been entitled to nominate the Deputy First Minister, with powers equal to those of First Minister, since 2007. Sinn Féin’s new status as largest party outright now entitled it to nominate the First Minister. However, fulfilment of this post required the largest party in the unionist designation, the DUP, to join Sinn Féin’s northern leader, Michelle O’Neill in loveless political matrimony by nominating a Deputy First Minister, an invitation eschewed by the DUP in the immediate election aftermath.

Sinn Féin’s 2022 election manifesto demanded a date be set for a border poll, a constitutional referendum on whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK or become part of a united Ireland.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nonetheless, the party insisted that the election was not about Irish unity but instead concerned more immediate issues: the crisis in Northern Ireland’s health service, with its long waiting lists, plus the rising cost-of-living. The nationalist versus unionist divide was straddled in that health and the economy were the most important election issues. This was reflected in a consensus across party manifestoes. Sinn Féin pledged an extra £1 billion of expenditure on the NHS; the DUP likewise.[[2]](#footnote-2) Sinn Féin pledged £230 to every household as an immediate payment to assist with the increased costs of living, with more to those on benefits, £30 more than the SDLP’s offer.

Focusing upon economic and social concerns helped Sinn Féin hold all its Assembly seats and achieve a slight increase in vote share. The DUP argued that Sinn Féin becoming the largest parry and taking the First Ministership would create perpetual talk of a border poll and constitutional uncertainty. In the zero-sum game of unionist versus nationalist binaries, the DUP’s argument and refusal to confirm it would return to government may have assisted Sinn Féin, bolstering its vote among nationalists determined that the First Minister should be drawn from their community. Only Sinn Féin could realistically provide a nationalist First Minister.

**No Protocol, No Power-Sharing? The DUP’s absence from Stormont**

The DUP offered a five-point plan to grow the economy, create more jobs, improve the health service and increase free childcare. The DUP also demanded removal of the Irish Sea trade border created under the EU Northern Ireland Protocol, having established seven tests by which removal would be judged. These involved equal treatment for everyone in the Union; no diversion of trade; no Irish Sea border; no checks on goods going from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and vice-versa; a say for the people of Northern Ireland in the laws that govern them; no new regulatory barriers; and the upholding of the principle of consent for constitutional change.

Opposition to an internal UK trade border registered high on unionist election concerns, albeit below health and the economy. Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, DUP leader from June 2021, had initially called merely for ‘meaningful reform’ of the Protocol. However, with the TUV, even more strongly opposed to the Irish Sea border, outpolling the DUP by summer 2021 and Donaldson’s party languishing in an unprecedented third place among unionist parties the DUP’s attitude hardened.[[3]](#footnote-3) Despite this, the DUP lost more than 40,000 votes at the election. whilst the TUV gained a similar number. These TUV votes meant that the DUP’s share of the unionist bloc vote, whilst still an overall majority, fell to its lowest since 2003, as Table 5 shows. Unionism’s divisions helped ease Sinn Féin to the First Minister post.

**Table 5 Unionist party shares of the Unionist bloc vote, Assembly elections 1998-2022**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | DUP | UUP | UKUP | PUP | TUV |
| 1998 | 38.2 | 44.7 | 9.4 | 5.4 | n/a |
| 2003 | 50.5 | 44.7 | 1.4 | 2.3 | n/a |
| 2007 | 63.9 | 31.7 | 3.2 | 1.2 | n/a |
| 2011 | 65.3 | 28.8 | n/a | 0.5 | 5.4 |
| 2016 | 63.4 | 27.3 | n/a | 1.9 | 7.4 |
| 2017 | 63.5 | 29.1 | n/a | 1.6 | 5.8 |
| 2022 | 52.7 | 27.6 | n/a | 0.8 | 18.9 |

NB. Unionist *political* *parties* only. Excludes shares won by individual independent unionist candidates which were sizeable in some cases (e.g. both Claire Sugden and Alex Easton were elected as such in 2022)

The division between the TUV and DUP on one side and the UUP on the other represented perhaps the most significant faultline within unionism since its divisions in the late 1990s and early 2000s over whether to support the Good Friday Agreement. The TUV and DUP (although only the latter had the power to cause serious difficulties) were prepared to jeopardise the Agreement’s power-sharing institutions and perhaps the Agreement itself by refusing to work within them until the EU Protocol was changed. The UUP did not believe opposition to the Protocol justified such uncompromising tactics but its stance saw the party marooned at its second lowest ever share of the Unionist bloc for an Assembly election. The UUP’s political approach was to support UK legislation to bolster protections for the EU Single Market to the point where checks on Great Britain to Northern Ireland goods would become superfluous. The party proposed making it a criminal offence to export goods designed for the UK Single Market into the EU’s, indemnification for the EU in the event of breaches and an all-island body to ensure compliance.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The DUP’s hardened stance on the Protocol became evident in February 2022, when the party withdrew its First Minister. Paul Givan, from the ruling Executive, to pressure the EU into backing down on the Protocol. Under the power-sharing rules, Michelle O’Neill, as Sinn Féin First Minister, lost her job and only a collection of ministers, not a full devolved government remained in place, unable to spend money on new projects.

Given the withdrawal of its First Minister prior to the election, an early DUP return to the Executive to nominate a Deputy First Minister always looked doubtful and so it transpired. DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson further added to the sense of crisis via two other moves. Having topped the poll in his Lagan Valley constituency, the DUP leader decided to remain at Westminster rather than take his new Stormont seat, co-opting DUP former MLA and MP Emma Little-Pengelly into the Assembly. The DUP also declined to help provide a cross-community majority for a new Speaker, ensuring that a new Assembly could not be established.

It seemed evident that only substantial movement on the Protocol would entice the DUP back into the political institutions. In June 2022, the UK government introduced domestic legislation to disapply the Protocol, confining checks on goods entering Northern Ireland from Great Britain to those destined to head to the Irish Republic, rather than merely being ‘at risk’ of so doing and removing the European Court of Justice as the arbitrator of the Protocol. The legislation was likely to face difficulties in parliament and potentially in the courts.

**The rise of the centre ground: the Alliance Party**

The election confirmed the continuing rise to third-largest party of the cross-community Alliance Party, drawing upon Protestant, Catholic and non-religious identifiers for support. Alliance had already greatly improved its performance in the 2019 European, council and Westminster elections and this completed the set. Although Alliance’s first preference vote share of 13.5% was below the 2019 high point of 18.5% (in the European contest) it nonetheless amounted to significant progress from the party’s single figure percentage vote to which the party had been restricted at every previous Assembly election.

Alliance more than doubled its Assembly representation, aided by considerable lower preference transfer-friendliness. Alliance received vote transfers from various sources: 23% from the UUP, 21% from Sinn Féin and 16% from the SDLP. Alliance’s main vote, however, is from those identifying as neither unionist nor nationalist. According to the latest annual Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, this category, at 38%, is the largest type of elector.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Four in every five first preference votes at the Assembly election were cast for unionists or nationalists so the centre ground of the non-aligned has still to bare most of its electoral teeth. However, Alliance is tapping into it and represents the centre ground exclusively. Once regarded as a ‘small u’ unionist party, supportive of Northern Ireland’s place in the UK, Alliance is neutral on the constitution, insisting it will decide a position only when a border poll is called.

For Alliance, the more immediate task is to deal with non-constitutional issues. The party’s election manifesto, at 90 pages by some distance the most extensive offering, outlined a plethora of proposed bills across a very eclectic range of subjects, covering animal welfare, blasphemy conversion therapy, equality, flags, hate crime, sentencing, education, energy, environment, hunting and criminal sentencing.[[6]](#footnote-6) Alliance also focused upon how to break stalemates regularly evident in the formation or maintenance of the Executive and Assembly. For nearly 40% of the time since powers were devolved from Westminster in December 1999, the Executive has been absent.

Unsurprisingly for a party committed to moving politics beyond a unionist versus nationalist binary, Alliance’s proposals were designed to end what it saw as the institutionalisation of that divide within political arrangements, one which also disadvantages the party. Accordingly, the party argued for removal of the requirement for MLAs to designate as unionist, nationalist or ‘other’. Weighted majority voting, requiring key measures to have legislative support across a substantial section of the Assembly, would be used instead. Alliance also proposed changes to how the First and Deputy First Minister are nominated. If the largest party in either the unionist or nationalist blocs refuses to nominate, this collapses the Executive under the current formula. Alliance proposed a voluntary coalition of the willing, under which the two largest parties could fill the posts, with the right passing to the next largest in the event of refusal.

**Political futures**

There was little incentive for the DUP to return quickly to power-sharing. Under legislation passed shortly before the election, the parties were allowed 24 weeks (previously it was supposedly 7 days) to resolve the First and Deputy First Minister issue. If this was unachievable, the Secretary of State was obliged to call a new election, although this could be circumvented by emergency laws. In the immediate aftermath of the election, the DUP’s refusal to nominate a Deputy First Minister or nominate a Speaker meant there was neither a full Executive nor an Assembly. Political paralysis was hardly new, although the reasons have varied greatly. The longest stand-off, from Autumn 2002 to Spring 2007, followed collapse over allegations of an IRA spy ring at Stormont and rows over the pace of IRA decommissioning of weapons. Sinn Féin had quit power-sharing in 2017 for several reasons but principally the handling of the botched Renewable Heating Incentive scheme by Arlene Foster, the DUP minister responsible who had by that point become First Minister. That stand-off took three years to resolve, exacerbated by continuing rows over Irish language provision, until the New Decade New Approach deal of January 2020 proposed a commissioner to promote the Irish language, alongside an Ulster Scots/British near-equivalent.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Longer-term questions were raised by Sinn Féin’s advance, allowing that there was little immediate prospect of a border poll. Opinion polls suggest the party is on course to become the largest in the Irish Republic at the next election, the latest electoral reward for its fusion of distance from (but not disavowal of) its past, much greater moderation combined with continuing anti-establishment tendencies. If Sinn Féin is the biggest party in government in both jurisdictions on the island, political pressure for a constitutional referendum will surely grow. The power to call a border poll in Northern Ireland rests purely with the British Secretary of State. The Good Friday Agreement declares that such a referendum must be called ‘if at any time it appears likely to him (sic) that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Legal attempts to establish the criteria by which such a view will be formed have proved unsuccessful.

Whilst the combined vote for unionist parties remained larger than that for nationalist parties, the difference in support for candidates on either side of the constitutional question was marginal at the election. Pro-United Ireland parties and candidates won 41.6% (363,891) of the votes, whilst pro-Union parties and candidates: won 42.1% (358,768). These figures include votes for independent unionist and nationalist candidates. Votes for constitutionally neutral parties and candidates totalled 16.2% (140,050). Nonetheless, the Secretary of State will prefer to look at opinion poll evidence on the constitutional question. The ‘poll of polls’ on the constitutional question suggests 49% support for the status quo and 36% backing for a united Ireland, not enough to trigger a border poll.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Conclusion**

The 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election reordered the top two parties in Northern Ireland whilst also illuminating the growth of a substantial centrist force beyond unionism and nationalism, in the form of Alliance. There was little early indication that the election would achieve anything. Disagreement over the EU Protocol, accompanied by the DUP’s capacity to deploy a veto, ensured that the political institutions were in abeyance for the short term. What the ‘short term’ amounted to was unclear. Political stalemate in a consociational system like that of Northern Ireland was hardly new. Veto rights and community autonomy have often been ranged against the other two consociational pillars of grand coalition and proportionality in government, rather than operating as complementary features (see e.g Jarrett 2018). The election would need to be followed by movement on the EU Protocol to restart the devolved power-sharing at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement.

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3. <https://www.lucidtalk.co.uk/single-post/lt-ni-tracker-poll-summer-2021> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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7. HM Government (2020) New Decade New Approach, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade__a_new_approach.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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