



Research Update

Changing Party Fortunes: Party Competition and Public Opinion at the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections of 2003

by Paul Mitchell, Geoffrey Evans and Brendan O'Leary



Simply surviving to reach a second regularly scheduled election was something of a triumph for the Northern Ireland Assembly and the peace process. Not one of the earlier Assemblies, Conventions, or Forums elected since the end of the Stormont regime in 1972 have had a second term. However, given the results of the 2001 Westminster elections, the once dominant parties in their respective blocs - the UUP and SDLP - were bound to view the crucial 2003 elections with some trepidation. The DUP was in a good position to challenge for the leading position among unionists and most of its campaign appeals of 2001 were likely to still have resonance. And among nationalists Sinn Féin was clearly the party with the electoral wind in its sails. In 2003 it appeared that the British Government's recurring nightmare was likely to come to pass: the two 'extremist' parties - the DUP and Sinn Féin - would come to dominate their respective communities. While we have argued elsewhere that both of these parties have picked up electoral

momentum precisely because they have dramatically moderated their positions, only whole-hearted optimists would have imagined that a power-sharing deal between the DUP and Sinn Féin could easily be arranged following the election in November 2003.

Largely because it feared victories by the DUP and Sinn Féin in their respective blocs, the UK government twice postponed the 2003 Assembly election that should have been held by June (which marked the end of the Assembly's regular 5 year term). After no breakthrough in negotiations, the government called the elections for 26 November, after which they expected a quite different bargaining context.

The election took place during a period in which the 'peace process' was clearly stalled. The optimism of 1998 was either gone, or severely dented - given that durable power-sharing had not been established during the intervening 5 years.

With the Assembly and its Executive suspended for over a year before the election, there was little prospect of further development of the Pro-Agreement versus Anti-Agreement division, which might encourage electoral cooperation between the UUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin. Given that the first inter-ethnic pro-agreement coalition had collapsed, it was always likely that the 2003 election would revert to the traditional mould of NI elections: a fierce intra-ethnic battle within the main blocs, with the rival parties mainly focused on emerging as their community's pre-eminent tribunes. As anticipated, the DUP and Sinn Féin were clearly the big winners of the 2003 elections and their electoral advances were even greater than many people expected.

The rise and fall of the parties

Before the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, Sinn Féin averaged 11% of the vote. Since then Sinn Féin has increased its vote at every election, from 15.5% in 1996 to 23.5% in 2003. If the peace process has very clearly been the handmaiden of Sinn Féin's electoral success, there is a real risk that the making of the Agreement ultimately looks like being the high-water mark for the SDLP. Ever since, they have been in decline and are in danger of going into freefall. Having fleetingly become the largest party in 1998, the SDLP fell back to fourth place. Indeed, its 2003 vote was the SDLP's worst performance in a NI election since its inaugural electoral outing in the 1973 local government elections. The big battle for the nationalist vote culminated in 2003 with a clearer-than-ever victory for Sinn Féin. The ratio of Sinn Féin to SDLP votes is now 58:42. Moreover, this transformation in fortunes is unlikely to be just a case of 'one or two bad elections' for the SDLP. The demographic and attitudinal evidence we analyse below suggests that the SDLP is in real electoral trouble. Even its own supporters have serious doubts about its future.

In 1969 the once monolithic UUP attracted 61% of the vote in the region. Even as late as the 1982 Assembly elections (with fierce competition from the DUP) it managed 30%. In 2003 the UUP only attracted just under 23% (its second worst performance ever; second to its 1998 score, leaving aside the distinctive and second-order European Parliamentary elections). Of course the UUP had been tearing itself apart since the spring of 1998 in a well-publicised internal civil war (between the pro- and anti-agreement factions, led by David Trimble and Jeffrey Donaldson, respectively), so that a strong performance in 2003 was highly unlikely. The increasingly fractious UUP, combined with the desire of many in the unionist

community to offer a strong response to the electoral surge of Sinn Féin among nationalists, rendered the relatively united DUP a desirable, or at least palatable choice. In 2003, the DUP became easily the biggest party in NI with just under 26% of the vote. The ratio of DUP to UUP voters at the election was 53:47. These figures underestimate the extent of the DUP's current dominance because following the election three anti-Agreement candidates, who had been elected on the UUP ticket, resigned and joined the DUP. Thus the DUP has 33 MLA's to the UUP's 24. Set within this political context, this Research Update will present results from the 2003 **Assembly Election Study**, and the 1998 **Referendum and Election Study**.

Who voted for which party?

Clearly party support remains ethnographically exclusive with the four largest parties continuing to draw between 94-96% of their support from one community only.

Contrary to popular caricatures, DUP voters are no more likely than UUP supporters to be religious. As a whole, DUP supporters (compared to the UUP) are younger, less likely to be highly educated, and much more likely to be working class. The contrast among the nationalist parties is similar. Sinn Féin supporters (compared to the SDLP) are likely to be much younger, less educated, less religious, and more likely to be working class.

The real story of the 2003 elections is dramatically highlighted in Table 3 which shows each party's ability to retain its 1998 vote. As usual all movement is contained within each communal bloc. Ninety two percent of the DUP's 1998 voters remained loyal to the party in 2003, with only a handful switching to the UUP. By contrast the UUP could not hold on to its 1998 voters: one quarter (24%) of them defected to the DUP. There was a similar (though not quite so sharp) pattern in the nationalist party system: 19% of SDLP voters defected to Sinn Féin in 2003, a clear break with practice up until the mid-1990s, when SDLP supporters shunned Sinn Féin. By contrast Sinn Féin itself held onto almost all of its 1998 voters.

Perceived effectiveness

Respondents were asked "Which party do you think has been the most effective voice for nationalists/unionists in Northern Ireland?" For nationalists there is a clear winner. Over three times as many respondents picked Sinn Féin rather than the SDLP as the most effective party in representing nationalists (69% and 22% respectively). Supporters¹ of every party

¹ In this case we looked at party identification rather than how people voted. Supporter refers to the party that people say they support rather than the party that they voted for. Some respondents will be included here who did not actually vote but who still consider themselves to be supporters of that party.

Table 1: First preference vote, by religion

	%			
	DUP	UUP	SDLP	SF
Catholic	0	1	94	94
Protestant	96	95	2	1
No religion	4	4	4	5

Table 2: First preference vote by voter characteristics

	%			
	DUP	UUP	SDLP	SF
Mean age	51	54	51	44
18-30	15	8	15	22
Male	47	54	32	45
Female	53	46	68	55
Education: 'A' level or higher	18	31	38	25
No formal qualification	56	38	40	53
Working class (self-perception)	70	42	56	80
Religious (self-perception)	57	56	79	65

placed Sinn Féin first. (See Table 4) Most strikingly – the only party that is divided on the subject are the SDLP, and even a majority of its supporters (51%) felt that Sinn Féin had been more effective than their own party in representing nationalists! If this is what even SDLP supporters really believe, then the party is in big trouble.

Opinion is more divided relating to the most effective voice for unionists, with each unionist party's supporters identifying their own party. (See Table 5) Nevertheless, there are clearly very worrying signs for the UUP. Even among its own supporters, only 58% judge that it has been the most effective voice for unionism, with 39% believing that the DUP has been more effective. By contrast, DUP supporters are much less divided, with 91% judging that their own party has been the most effective. Finally, nationalist voters' evaluations of the two main unionist parties are almost a perfect mirror image of one another: SDLP supporters judge that the UUP has been the most effective, in the same proportion that Sinn Féin supporters pick the DUP.

Is there any good news?

Everyone knows that support for the Good Friday Agreement has declined since the historic deal was negotiated in 1998, and that most disillusionment has been among Protestants. In our survey, 65% of Protestants claim to have voted to approve the Agreement in the 1998 referendum, whereas only 45% said they would have done so again at the time of the 2003 election. Catholic support for the Agreement remains overwhelming, so we must emphasise that two thirds of all voters in Northern Ireland say that they would still vote "Yes" to the Agreement. As one would expect, most of the opposition to the Agreement among unionists comes from DUP supporters. Just over one fifth of them say they would support the Agreement in a referendum now, compared with two thirds of UUP supporters.

Changing attitudes?

Since the Agreement was deliberately negotiated to contain something for everyone, it is to be expected that each party's supporters evaluate its key features differently. Unionists initially opposed all-Ireland North-South agencies, but there

Table 3: 'Loyalists' and Defectors between 1998 and 2003

	%			
	First preference vote in 2003			
1998 vote	DUP	UUP	SDLP	SF
DUP	92	3	0	0
UUP	24	69	2	0
SF	0	0	5	94
SDLP	1	0	73	19

Table 4: Most effective voice for nationalists in Northern Ireland, by party support

	%				
	Party supporters				
Most effective	Alliance	DUP	UUP	SDLP	SF
Alliance	0	0	1	0	0
DUP	0	1	0	0	1
UUP	4	1	0	0	0
SF	76	77	67	51	95
SDLP	22	17	30	46	0

Table 5: Most effective voice for nationalists in Northern Ireland, by party support

	%				
	Party supporters				
Most effective	Alliance	DUP	UUP	SDLP	SF
Alliance	4	0	0	1	0
DUP	33	91	39	36	57
UUP	51	7	58	56	33
SF	0	0	0	0	0
SDLP	0	0	1	1	0

is now a slight decrease in Protestant opposition to these implementation bodies: from 29% in 1998 to 22%. The highly symbolic resonance these bodies once had for some unionists has been calmed as they have not been threatening in practice. Some key news from the survey is the increasing support for decommissioning and mandatory power-sharing. While support for the decommissioning of all paramilitary weapons was high – and is increasing among all sections of the population – the most notable change is a substantial rise in Catholic support for decommissioning, including among Sinn Féin voters, from 83% to 93%. A mere 6% of Sinn Féin's supporters oppose decommissioning.

Power-sharing is at the heart of the Agreement. Support for power-sharing has substantially increased since 1998 – by twelve percentage points overall from 72 to 84%. Indeed, 76% of Protestants now say they support the principle of mandatory Executive power-sharing (up from 62% in 1998). Despite all the difficulties of the five years between 1998 and 2003, with the Northern Ireland Executive repeatedly suspended by the Westminster Parliament, popular support for mandatory sharing of Executive power is now overwhelming.

Conclusion

The 2003 Assembly Election Study confirms changing patterns of party support. It is now not possible to sustain the notion that Sinn Féin electoral growth comes only (or even mainly) from mobilising former abstentionist voters (and thus not hurting the SDLP). We have seen that by their own admission one in five of the SDLP's 1998 voters defected to Sinn Féin in 2003. Perhaps even more alarming for the SDLP, is that a majority of its own supporters regard Sinn Féin as the most effective party in standing up for nationalists. The pattern is similar among unionists. The UUP's internal haemorrhaging is reflected in disaffected supporters: a quarter of the UUP's 1998 voters report that they defected to the DUP in 2003. Even among those UUP supporters that remained loyal to their party in 2003 39% of them think that their rivals in the DUP are a more effective voice for unionists.

The 2003 elections have done what democratically responsive elections are supposed to do: effected a 'sorting process' between attitudes and parties, so that the parties with the more attractive, united and vibrant issue positions made electoral advances.

This survey shows there is no mandate for abandoning the Agreement, and that there is whole-hearted cross-community support for mandatory power-sharing and decommissioning – and a reduced fear of North-South bodies among Protestants. Provided Sinn Féin can organise the final disarmament of the IRA, provided the DUP can accept power-sharing with republicans and provided the UK and Irish governments can protect the Agreement's power-sharing institutions, there is every reason that the present ascendancy of the DUP and Sinn Féin can become a creative moment. But that will require skilled political deal-making all around.

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The 2003 Assembly Election Survey was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

The **2003 Northern Ireland Election Survey** was carried out between November 2003 and February 2004. 1000 adults were interviewed in their own homes. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services. We thank Lizanne Dowds for her help in constructing this briefing paper.

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