Beyond Unionism versus Nationalism: the Rise of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

JONATHAN TONGE

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 of 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 declares 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.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, centre ground, unionism, nationalism

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 per cent in the local elections, 12 per cent in the European contest and 9 per cent in the Westminster elections, gaining parliamentary representation in Westminster and Brussels (albeit temporarily in the latter, given Brexit) and achieving a 65 per cent increase in local government seats. The party’s vote share of 19 per cent in the European election and 17 per cent 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. The annual Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys and the 2019 Northern Ireland General Election Survey have indicated that the section of Northern Ireland’s electorate stating they are neither unionist nor nationalist is now larger than that identifying as either unionist or nationalist.1 Historically, however, more than 90 per cent 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 General Election Survey to examine how and why a non-unionist, non-nationalist party has finally advanced. 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 per cent 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 per cent average vote share. Table 1 summarises Alliance Party election performances since the party’s creation.

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.3

Yet, three elections in 2019 saw major advancement. The party attracted more than 300,000 voters in total, averaged a 16 per cent 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 seventeen of Northern Ireland’s eighteen parliamentary constituencies. Several vote share increases were spectacular. Alliance gained North Down with 45 per cent of the vote; in 2017, the party’s share of the constituency was a mere 9 per cent. Alliance also came second in three constituencies. Meanwhile, the combined vote share of the largest two parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin, fell by 12 per cent. 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 per cent of the supporters of Naomi Long’s party at the 2019 contest. This was a much smaller rate of desertion than the 18 per cent shifting from the DUP at the previous contest and the 12 per cent from Sinn Féin. Former SDLP voters provided another 5 per cent, whilst 8 per cent 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 forty-five and under, and has an

| 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   |

*Note: First preference votes only; excludes by-elections. *Denotes only one such election contested. Source: CAIN Web Service, results of elections held in Northern Ireland since 1968.
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.

The proportion of Alliance Party voters who are graduates (31 per cent) is double that among DUP and Sinn Féin 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 higher regard than do unionists, surprisingly liking Alliance as much as those who hold neither a unionist nor nationalist ideology, the party’s natural repository of sympathy. Alliance’s anti-Brexit stance has helped (85 per cent 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.

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 per cent 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 per cent 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 two biggest parties, they were blamed by some voters for the Assembly’s collapse, which had

| 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: Northern Ireland General Election Survey, 2019.
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 per cent higher than the percentage of unionist identifiers and 15 per cent above those stating they are nationalist. Two decades earlier, at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, the Life and Times Survey found that only one-third of electors stated they were neither unionist nor nationalist, with unionism the most popular identification at 40 per cent, and nationalism on 25 per cent. 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, and there are only three journal articles dedicated to the organisation. The focus within ethnically divided societies is upon their ethnic parties, not organisations attempting to break the sectarian logjam. An exception, the 2009 study of the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) by Aaron Edwards, 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 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, it 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 per cent British, 33 per cent Irish, and 26 per cent 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 Irish-ness’ as a shared identity far more than

| Attitudes | 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: Northern Ireland General Election Survey, 2019.
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 who are neither unionist nor nationalists, although ‘neither unionist nor nationalist’ ideological identification is the most common, at 51 per cent of Alliance voters; 23 per cent say they are unionist and 17 per cent 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 Alliance voters are not immune from the sectarianism afflicting Northern Ireland. More than one in five Alliance voters say they ‘would mind a lot’ (5 per cent) or ‘a little’ (17 per cent) 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 per cent to 26 per cent 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 biodegrade a system which reifies binary—and, to critics, sectarian—politics.

The rules of the political game incorporate the ‘licensing’ 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 routes 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 party 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.

Notes

1 The Northern Ireland 2019 General Election Survey was conducted by the universities of Liverpool, Aberdeen, Leeds and the LSE. The survey used post-election face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of 2,003 electors across the region’s eighteen parliamentary constituencies. Funding was provided by the ESRC; fieldwork was undertaken by Social Market Research Belfast; and the author was the Principal Investigator. The Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys are conducted annually, with results available at https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/ (accessed 28 April 2020).
2 CAIN Web Service, ‘Results of elections held in Northern Ireland Since 1968’; https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/election/elect.htm (accessed 28 April 2020).
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