The 2019 General Election in Northern Ireland: the Rise of the Centre Ground?

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Abstract
The experience of the 2019 general election in Northern Ireland took a very different course to that of the rest of the UK and, indeed, to the pattern of electoral politics typical of the region. Coming after almost three years with no functioning devolved government, combined with intense disagreement and uncertainty about Brexit, voters were ready to give a message to the two largest parties. Both Sinn Féin and the DUP suffered losses in the election, with the headline outcome being that unionism no longer holds the majority of seats for Northern Ireland in Westminster. More generally, there was a swing from both sides towards centre ground voting, which brought significant gains for the Alliance Party and the SDLP. This article summarises the reasons for this broad trend, focussing on the conditions and electoral pacts which brought it about. It also considers what it might mean for the prospects for Irish unification, noting that a referendum on unification will only be passed by attracting votes from those who tend to see themselves as neither unionist or nationalist.

Keywords: Alliance Party, Brexit, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), electoral pacts, Irish unification, SDLP, Sinn Féin

The context
The fact that the general election was announced so swiftly after the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement received its first endorsement in the House of Commons is key to understanding the course and outcome of the campaign in Northern Ireland. The Withdrawal Agreement contained the revised Protocol on Northern Ireland/Ireland—a document which was roundly condemned by every single one of the political parties in the region. It is quite unprecedented for political parties in Northern Ireland to find common cause on anything; that in this case they were uniting in condemnation of a text endorsed by both British and Irish governments is particularly striking. This shows, more broadly, that Brexit has triggered something quite distinct in the political environment of the region. In an exceptional way, Brexit has complicated, if not transcended, the traditional unionist/nationalist binary that defines political positions here. This was encapsulated in the general election of December 2019.

There is a certain irony in this, given that political representation from Northern Ireland in Westminster was painted in very stark green and orange for the previous Parliament. In 2017, abstentionist Sinn Féin took seats from the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) took from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), between them taking all but one of the region’s eighteen Westminster seats. This meant that the only MP from Northern Ireland taking her seat in the Commons who was not in the DUP was Lady Sylvia Hermon, an independent from North Down. The subsequent distortion in the representation of remain-majority Northern Ireland in Westminster—with the predominance of the leave-supporting DUP—was further exacerbated by the confidence and supply arrangement made between the DUP and the Conservative Party. This arrangement put a pro-leave, pro-Union bias in the opinions from Northern Ireland that were closest to the heart of government during the course of the Brexit withdrawal negotiations.
The calling of the 2019 general election was thus seized by the pro-remain and middle ground parties in Northern Ireland as a means of redressing the imbalance. In particular, the SDLP and the centrist Alliance Party believed it was possible to make electoral gains in this so-called ‘Brexit election’. They wished to address the sense of relative ‘voicelessness’ for Northern Ireland in the Brexit process (put into stark relief by the region’s place at the centre of so much of the debate over withdrawal) by offering clear pro-remain positions. It is easy to forget in light of the results, but there was a genuine belief among all sides that the election could well result in a hung Parliament. Thus, all parties in Northern Ireland campaigned from the underlying hope that MPs from Northern Ireland could potentially be the kingmakers in the next government. That this was true of the DUP as well as the pro-remain parties indicates quite how far expectations have had to fall in the region since the election; there is no delusion now as to what difference regional MPs can make in national policy. This appears now to be affecting the behaviour of all eighteen members of the 2019 cohort in the rare efforts at cooperation that continued into the debate around the Withdrawal Agreement Bill.

The parties’ campaigns

The Democratic Unionist Party’s twelve-point plan issued early on in the election campaign claimed that ‘In the last Parliament it was the votes of the DUP that altered the course of events’. Yet, despite such influence, the version of the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by Johnson and ratified by the UK Parliament in January 2020 was the one that the party publicly rejected. As with Theresa May before him, Boris Johnson had to make a choice between guaranteeing close future UK-EU relations and treating Northern Ireland differently from the rest of the UK. Whereas May had chosen to prioritise the UK internal market, Johnson chose to avoid any constraints on the quest for a hard Brexit. The fact he had promised never to do such a thing added insult to the injury thus caused to the DUP. The confidence and supply arrangement between the DUP and the Conservative Party was long redundant anyway—the DUP hadn’t supplied the votes they promised the government, and the Tories had long lost confidence in them. After having played their part in humiliating his predecessor, the DUP now had to face the humiliation of having been so obviously betrayed by the Prime Minister. If Johnson’s dropping of the DUP in order to get a deal over the line proved anything, it was that a hard Brexit was a greater priority than a United Kingdom.

As always, the Union of the UK remains the paramount issue for the DUP. Among its top general election promises/demands, was that ‘The customs and consent arrangements [in the Withdrawal Agreement] must be revisited and a one-nation approach adopted’. That the DUP’s understanding of one-nationism is so different to that of mainstream Conservatives is quite telling. The election results reflected the general view that the nation of primary concern for the Conservative Party is England. Perhaps in implied recognition of the Conservative Party having lost its unionist credentials, DUP MP Jeffrey Donaldson did not rule out a situation in which his party would support either a second referendum or a Labour government (albeit not under a Corbyn premiership). The Ulster Unionist Party was also feeling uneasy about the potential consequences of the Withdrawal Agreement for the Union—so much so that its new party leader (Steve Aiken, who replaced Robin Swann in November 2019) quickly announced that the party would rather support remain than this deal. It too campaigned from a position of opposition to the Conservative Party’s stance, whilst also indicating a slightly far-fetched belief that it could well end up making a difference to that stance. (The UUP had briefly formed an alliance with the Conservative Party a decade before.) Although apparently willing to replace the DUP in the affections of the Conservative Party, the UUP’s argument against the DUP was based on the assertion that they were ‘patsies’ to the Tories.

Of course, a narrative of English or UK government betrayal is quite common among nationalist parties in Northern Ireland. Somewhat incongruously, Sinn Féin is the party least opposed to Johnson’s deal, seeing the Protocol as offering some form of...
status’ for Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin is a party that stands at elections in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. As such, its primary electoral focus, even in 2019, was on considerations on the island of Ireland. As such, its party that stands at elections in both jurisdictions from the worst risks of the Protocol. Sinn Féin is a party that stands at elections in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. As such, its party that stands at elections in both jurisdictions from the worst risks of the Protocol. Also campaigning for a ‘People’s Vote’ on Brexit with a remain option was the non-aligned Alliance Party. It opposed Boris Johnson’s deal, but committed early on to seeking a soft Brexit for all the UK after the Withdrawal Agreement’s ratification, and to seeking further mitigation for the region. In terms of wider policies, its stance would be contrary to that of the Conservative Party, for example, on the welfare system, immigration and the Human Rights Act. It is perhaps quite telling that fifteen days from polling day, Alliance was the only party in the region that had published a full manifesto; parties in Northern Ireland are confident that they will secure votes on a basis other than detailed awareness of their policies. The general election of 2019 brought a unique context for this custom. In most constituencies in the region, it is usually a foregone conclusion as to whether the successful candidate will be green or orange—the question is just a matter of which shade of nationalism or unionism will take the seat. When it came to 2019, all but one constituency was being held by the hard-line version of unionism or nationalism, meaning that the question being asked in all these cases was whether the DUP or Sinn Féin would hold its seat. However, the context for the election was so different in 2019 compared to previous elections that we saw new dynamics at work. When people came to vote, they were not just asking whether they wanted the boldest version of nationalism or unionism; they were judging the performance of the DUP and Sinn Féin against new measures. These primarily came under two headings: (1) the party’s performance vis-à-vis Brexit; and (2) the party’s failure to come to an agreement to get Stormont up and running again. The latter issue was a matter that was inseparable from severe crises in public services, including education cutbacks, the longest healthcare waiting lists in the UK and Ireland, and an unprecedented strike among nursing staff. In most constituencies, how people voted when making such a judgement of Sinn Féin or the DUP to a large extent reflected whether an electoral pact was in play.

Selective electoral pacts

Electoral pacts are much more familiar in Northern Ireland than in Britain. In the election of 2019, they took different forms, depending on the nature of the constituency. Where the smaller parties felt they had a chance, the pro-remain pacts were in evidence. Where Sinn Féin considered itself to have less of a chance of winning, it stepped aside for the moderate parties to play the remain card. Hence, for example, Sinn Féin stood aside in South Belfast and East Belfast to support pro-remain SDLP and Alliance candidates running against the DUP incumbent (proving successful in the case of the former constituency). As Sinn Féin President, Mary Lou McDonald, put it ‘The reality is we are asking people to come out and vote for those pro-remain candidates’. However, this was just in selected cases. In constituencies where there was a straight-run contention between unionism and nationalism, electoral pacts reflected the usual green/orange binary. Hence, the SDLP stood aside to support Sinn Féin’s John Finucane in what proved a successful but bruising effort to
dislodge the DUP’s deputy leader, Nigel Dodds, from North Belfast. In their quest to put unionism before party, the UUP did not run in North Belfast whilst, for their part, the DUP did not run in Fermanagh South Tyrone to support the UUP candidate. The fact that there were no pro-leave electoral pacts reflects three things. First, that the pro-leave support base was far less sure than the pro-remain one. Second, the fact that the UUP had been somewhat ambiguous over Brexit (campaigning for remain but coming out as strongly pro-leave after the referendum result). And third, that the DUP seemed really to have swept up much of the pro-leave support anyway. The fact that the DUP MP for South Belfast urged people to ‘stay calm’ in response to the news that the UUP was to run a candidate in the constituency was a sign that this is no typical electoral hunting ground. Why should any candidate apparently consider the running of another candidate as potential cause for social unrest? The fear of the loss of any unionist seat was not about losing Brexit, but rather about weakening the Union. The acute sensitivity to these features is generated by the very specific context for this election. A YouGov poll issued shortly before the election generated a lot of media coverage in the region; it found voters’ attitudes in Britain to feel somewhat blithely detached vis-à-vis Northern Ireland. It also apparently revealed a willingness of a majority of both leavers (64 per cent) and remainers (58 per cent) in Britain to sacrifice Northern Ireland’s place in the United Kingdom in exchange for their preferred Brexit outcome.

The results

The turnout in Northern Ireland was 62.1 per cent, five points lower than the UK average. And turnout was down in every constituency, except the two most hotly contested seats in Belfast: North Belfast (which was a straightforward face-off between the DUP and Sinn Féin) and South Belfast (which saw a pro-remain constituency ousted its pro-leave DUP MP). The DUP lost both those two seats in Belfast, coming out with eight MPs overall. Sinn Féin gained Belfast North, but lost Foyle to the SDLP leader Colum Eastwood, resulting in maintaining its hold on a total of seven seats. Eastwood was joined by his party colleague Claire Hanna for South Belfast. The third new pro-remain MP was Stephen Farry of the Alliance Party for North Down—a seat which had been targeted heavily by the DUP long before independent Sylvia Hermon announced she would not stand for re-election. The success for the middle ground Alliance Party is seen not only in Farry’s election, but also in that his party leader, Naomi Long, gave the DUP’s Gavin Robinson tough competition in East Belfast (where the DUP’s vote fell 6.6 per cent and the Alliance Party’s rose by 8.2 per cent from the 2017 results), as did Sorcha Eastwood to Jeffrey Donaldson in Lagan Valley (where the Alliance vote rose 17.7 per cent and the DUP’s fell 16.5 per cent compared to 2017). Overall, the party’s vote share went up by 8.8 per cent, with Alliance candidates putting significant dents in the vote share of DUP MPs in strongly unionist constituencies (the DUP vote share was down 6.7 per cent). The DUP lost out (in votes and expected seat gains) because of a pro-remain vote coming from unionist voters as well as nationalist ones. The SDLP’s vote share was also up (by 3.1 per cent) on the 2017 results, which in part helps explain the loss in vote share for Sinn Féin (down by 5.4 per cent).

The loss of seats and vote share for the DUP is notable. For the first time, seats held by Northern Ireland unionists are in a minority both in the Assembly and in the House of Commons. But it would be wrong to see this as a general ‘greening’ of the Northern Ireland electorate or, indeed, to the workings of what the DUP likes to call a ‘pan-nationalist front’. The rise in nationalist-held seats came thanks to Sinn Féin’s success in North Belfast (a relatively unusual constituency in that it was a straightforward face-off between hard-line unionism and nationalism, with both the SDLP and UUP stepping aside), and also to the SDLP’s success in South Belfast (a leap of 31.3 per cent in vote share compared to 2017). The rise in support for the SDLP amounts to a pro-remain vote, a protest against abstentionism, and a statement of frustration at the failure of the two largest parties to govern at regional level. It does not mean a surge towards
Irish unity. Indeed, excluding independents, the unionist vote share overall was 43.1 per cent, nationalist was 39.8 per cent and non-aligned was 17 per cent. Most of the votes the DUP lost went to the Alliance Party—a party known for its remain credentials, and also the fact that it chooses to be non-aligned on the so-called constitutional question. In a move in distinct contrast to the results in Britain, let alone with usual practice in Northern Ireland, the ‘non-aligned’, middle ground seems to have come centre stage.

The constitutional question and the middle ground

According to the Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey (NILT), one in two people in Northern Ireland identify as neither unionist nor nationalist.3 However, even they don’t get away with not answering ‘The Question’ in Northern Ireland politics—and from this we see that the majority of such people are in favour of Northern Ireland being part of the UK on condition that there is devolved government. We can see from NILT results that the half of respondents who self-designate as non-aligned did change their views about the region’s long-term future in the period 2016–2018. These three years not only included the fallout from the Brexit referendum, but also the period when Stormont was not sitting (the Executive collapsed in January 2017). The devolved institutions were put on ice following the fallout from the scandal around ministers’ management of the Renewable Heating Incentive scheme, and a return to their full operation depended entirely on the willingness of the two largest parties to share power. The fact that this non-aligned cohort seemed most disgruntled or frustrated at the DUP–Sinn Féin impasse is possibly reflected in the rise in support for direct rule from among them during this time. Also notable is the rise in those saying that they ‘don’t know’ what the future of the region should be. We do not see a trend towards preference for Irish unification among this group over that period (Figure 1).

What is interesting is that these non-aligned individuals have not traditionally voted overwhelmingly for Alliance. Even as the proportion of the population who are ‘neither’ has grown, we have not seen Alliance gathering a greater proportion of their votes (which, according to NILT 1998–2018, has consistently been less than one in five ‘neithers’). Thus, Hayward and McManus argued in 2018 that, ‘to be Neither Unionist nor Nationalist does not automatically mean you vote for an “alternative” or middle ground party such as Alliance’.4 ‘Neithers’ vote across the spectrum and—more notably—the majority have tended not to vote at all.

Did this change in 2019? Alliance did well in local and European elections in Northern Ireland. And they surprised everyone by their success in the general election, where the first past the post system tends to work against them. What this means is that perhaps these ‘neithers’ and soft unionists were motivated more by remain (and possibly a protest vote against the DUP) and it is this change that made the difference. That said, the context for people making those assessments has changed. Those who are ‘neither’ unionist nor nationalist have increasingly come to see Brexit as making a United Ireland more likely. But this is across the board. In 2016, according to NILT, 18 per cent of unionist respondents thought Brexit made Irish unification more likely; by 2018 it was 28 per cent. The proportion of nationalists thinking this rose from 38 per cent in 2016 to 64 per cent in 2018. There is, perhaps, a certain amount of wishful thinking in how nationalists view the long-term consequences of Brexit. Nevertheless, what is clear is that Brexit has made it difficult for people in Northern Ireland to sit on the fence; perhaps just as important a trend over this time is the steady decline in those saying it had no effect.

But there is a big difference between expecting something and welcoming it. By late 2018 (the most recent time we have such data for), a third of DUP supporting respondents were saying Brexit makes them even less in favour of a United Ireland. Unsurprisingly, half (50 per cent exactly) of those respondents who support Sinn Féin said Brexit makes them even more in favour of it. And what is happening among the non-aligned? The NILT survey (2016–2018) has also found that almost one in three Alliance Party supporters say Brexit makes them
more in favour of Irish unity. However, in this they are out of sync with those who are neither unionist or nationalist more generally. At the time of the survey in late 2018, there was an increase among those non-aligned saying that Brexit makes them less in favour of Irish unity (up from 5 to 12 percent since 2016). This would show that we would be wise to be cautious about jumping to stark conclusions about what these election results mean about the prospects for Irish unity. That said, there is an ideological and constitutional earthquake happening across the UK. What will be left standing, what will fall and what will be built when the tremors subside, is as yet unpredictable. But we can be sure that what happens to the middle ground in Northern Ireland is worth keeping an eye on.

**Conclusion**

If the December 2019 general election was the Brexit election, the results from Northern Ireland would suggest that Brexit is having the opposite effect here compared to the rest of the UK: there is a move to the centre ground, and judging by where that vote went, the overriding common feature of that centre ground is pro-remain. In light of this, what is happening in the middle, among the avowedly non-aligned, is fascinating. They came out to vote in all three (local, European and general) elections.
in 2019 in a way not seen for over a decade. For the most part, it appears that they were motivated by their pro-remain stance and by frustration at DUP–Sinn Féin ability to hold the region in limbo, and by a dysfunctional form of devolution with its negative consequences for public services and investment. Such motivation also saw previous DUP and Sinn Féin voters change their minds and vote Alliance when in the polling booth. The future of Northern Ireland will be determined in no small part by what this middle ground decides to do. What does ‘remain’ sentiment look like in a post-Brexit Northern Ireland? The answers to this question will in part be decided by the type of deal—indeed, if we have one at all—that is negotiated between the UK and the EU at the end of 2020, for that deal will not only determine the prospects and nature of ‘Global Britain’, it will also shape the prospects and nature of unionism and nationalism within Northern Ireland. And this in turn will decide whether, 100 years after Northern Ireland’s creation, its political common ground takes hold or dissipates once more.

Notes
1 YouGov poll (sample size 1641 adults in Great Britain, 23–24 October 2019), results released 11 November 2019; https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudflare.com/cumulus_uploads/document/1ed2x72mnyougov%20northern%20ireland%20sentiment.pdf (accessed 5 February 2020).
2 Results calculated from Electoral Office of Northern Ireland; http://www.eoni.org.uk/Elections/Election-results-and-statistics/Election-results-and-statistics-2003-onwards/Elections-2019/UK-Parliamentary-Election-2019-Results (accessed 5 February 2020).
3 The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, conducted by ARK, uses randomised and non-quota sampling (n c.1200) and is the most reliable source of time series data on public attitudes in the region; https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt (accessed 5 February 2020).
4 K. Hayward and C. McManus, ‘Neither/nor: the rejection of unionist and nationalist identities in post-Agreement Northern Ireland’, Capital and Class, vol. 43, no. 1, March 2019, pp. 139–55, https://doi.org/10.1177/030981681881321 (accessed 5 February 2020).
5 University of Liverpool NI General Election Survey 2019, see: https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/humanities-and-social-sciences/research/research-themes/transforming-conflict/ni-election-survey-19/ (accessed 10 March 2020).