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Breaking Walls & Norms

A Report on the UK General Election in Northern Ireland, 2019

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Abstract

The 2019 UK general election had huge implications for Brexit, and in turn for Northern Ireland. The British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was championing a renegotiated UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement that had been strongly opposed by all political parties in Northern Ireland, the part of the UK it would most affect. At the same time, the region had been without a devolved government for nearly three years. Both factors led to unprecedented outcomes. The dominant parties, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin, both lost votes and seats, whilst the moderate Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) and cross-community Alliance Party both made significant gains. The end result, for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland, was that unionist candidates formed a minority amongst the region's elected representatives for Westminster. Notwithstanding the particular circumstances of the 2019 general election, social and political trends in Northern Ireland suggest that this is unlikely to be an electoral blip, but rather the beginning of a significant realignment.

Key Terms

Northern Ireland; United Kingdom; Brexit; 2019 general election; unionism; nationalism; political parties.

1. Background

1.1 National Context: From Theresa May's Backstop to Boris Johnson's Front-stop

The two years since the last UK general election of 8th June 2017 have been among the most tumultuous in British political history. The Conservative Prime Minister, Theresa May, called the 2017 election in the hope of securing a large majority to strengthen her hand in negotiating withdrawal from the EU negotiations. The Conservatives were returned as the largest party, but lost seats and their governing majority. As a result, May controversially entered a confidence-and-supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), its 10 MPs restoring the Prime Minister's working majority. Critics of the deal felt it compromised the UK government's role as a neutral arbiter in the Northern Ireland peace process, while representatives of other regions of the UK opposed the financial package the DUP negotiated for Northern Ireland under its terms.

Eighteen months of UK-EU withdrawal negotiations followed, wherein arrangements for Northern Ireland, and its border with the Republic of Ireland, emerged as the most complex and contentious issue. Constrained by May's negotiating 'Red Lines' – which included leaving the EU Single Market and Customs Union, while simultaneously avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland – her government sought a withdrawal agreement which would be acceptable to both pro- and anti-Brexit factions of the Conservative party as well as her DUP partners who insisted:

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“Northern Ireland must leave the European Union on the same terms as the rest of the United Kingdom” (Foster, 2017).

After months of talks, and much political drama, the UK and EU published a draft UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement on 14th November 2018. For Northern Ireland, this included a ‘backstop’ insurance policy, only to be triggered if the (yet to be negotiated) UK-EU Future Relationship Agreement did *not* allow the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland to remain frictionless. Under the terms of the backstop the UK and EU had agreed to establish a ‘Single Customs Territory’ which would see Northern Ireland align with EU rules and regulations for the purpose of enabling frictionless trade in goods on the island of Ireland. Meanwhile the whole of the UK would also follow some EU rules and regulations to facilitate, as far as possible, continuation of frictionless trade in goods between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. The backstop was not popular: the DUP rejected it because it differentiated Northern Ireland; Conservative Brexiteers were opposed because the UK would have to accept aspects of the EU’s legal *acquis*; and opposition parties either argued against Brexit *in toto* or specific terms and implications of May’s deal.

After three failed attempts to get her Withdrawal Agreement Bill² passed, May admitted defeat, announcing her resignation in May 2019. A Conservative Party leadership race was triggered, with Boris Johnson emerging victorious. Johnson immediately sought to re-open negotiations on the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement to remove what he described as the “unviable” and “anti-democratic” backstop (*BBC News* 2019a). Following renewed talks a revised UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement was published on 17th October 2019. The only substantial changes, however, were in respect to provisions for Northern Ireland. Where the terms of the backstop in May’s deal had UK-wide implications, in Johnson’s they were limited to Northern Ireland. Similarly, in the 2018 Agreement they were designed as an insurance policy; in the 2019 Withdrawal Agreement they would automatically apply at the end of the transition period after the UK left the EU, scheduled for 31st December 2020. In short, May’s UK-wide backstop had, been transformed into Johnson’s Northern Ireland-specific front-stop.

Johnson’s Agreement meant Northern Ireland would remain *de jure* inside the UK Customs Territory, but *de facto* in the EU Customs Union. It would continue to apply EU rules and regulations relevant to trade in goods, as necessary, to allow free-flowing trade on the island of Ireland. In order to ensure compliance with EU law, the new provisions meant trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland would be subject to additional checks and controls. Johnson hailed it as an “excellent deal,” but it was not warmly welcomed in Northern Ireland (*BBC News*, 2019b). DUP deputy leader Nigel Dodds’ said the Prime Minister had been “too eager by far to get a deal at any cost”, and a party statement later made clear they would not be supporting the agreement as it “undermine[d] the integrity of the Union” and was not economically beneficial for Northern Ireland (*BBC News*, 2019c; DUP, 2019a). The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) were more vehement in their language, respectively describing Johnson’s deal as an “absolute disgrace” and an agreement that “puts [Northern Ireland] in a waiting room for Irish unity” (Carroll and O’Carroll, 2019). The reactions of non-unionist parties were more muted but not positive. Sinn Féin described the new deal as the “least-worst option” in the circumstance while the SDLP and Alliance took the view that this deal was worse than May’s but better than a disastrous ‘No Deal’ scenario where the UK left the EU without negotiating new trading relations (in Bell, 2019).

As Johnson tried and failed to rush his new deal through parliament, his government gave mixed messages regarding its implications for Northern Ireland and trade with Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This caused serious concern for businesses in Northern Ireland, whilst the Chief Constable of the PSNI also warned of disorder from loyalists if they perceived the agreement to threaten the Union.

1.2 Local Context: From Polarisation to An Emerging Centre

² The European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill was the domestic legal statute required to give the terms of the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement force of law in the UK.

Northern Ireland had been without devolved government since January 2017. The collapse of the Executive over the mishandling of the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme had propelled the region into a prolonged period of political stasis. In the UK election of June 2017, the DUP and Sinn Féin both performed well. The DUP's vote share increased by 10.3%, resulting in 10 seats (+2) while Sinn Féin's share of the vote rose by 4.9% gaining the party seven seats (+3). The result was indicative of the polarising effect the Brexit debate was having on the already deeply divided Northern Irish electorate (see Murphy, 2018). The constitutional questions raised in Northern Ireland by the prospect of UK withdrawal from the EU, and the ethno-nationalist quality of the 2016 EU referendum vote – unionists were significantly more likely to vote Leave than nationalists or others (see Garry, 2017) – meant a swing toward harder-line unionist and nationalist parties was unsurprising. A polarised political atmosphere, and the strategic position of the DUP in Westminster, made the restoration of power-sharing government more difficult. Talks between DUP and Sinn Féin to restore power-sharing repeatedly failed. The prolonged absence of local government caused “stagnation and decay” in public services (Sterling, 2019), particularly in the already weak healthcare system (see Bengoa *et al*, 2016).

In May 2019, results of local and European Parliament elections in Northern Ireland showed a significant rise in support for centrist, non-aligned candidates. A surge in support for the cross-community Alliance Party was the main story of the 2019 local elections. Alliance received 11.5% (+4.8%) of first preference votes and gained 53 seats (+21) in its most successful local election result in decades. The jump in support for Alliance was part of a broader trend away from unionist and nationalist candidates towards those who align as ‘Neither’. Support for Independent candidates increased by 2.2%, support for the Green Party Northern Ireland (Green Party) by 1.2%, and for People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA) by 1.1%. An upward trend for ‘Neither’ parties came at the expense of the moderate Unionist UUP, whose vote share decreased 2%, the TUV, whose vote share decreased by 2.3%, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), whose vote share decreased 1.2%, and the UK Independence Party, whose vote share decreased 1.1%. On the other side of the electoral divide, support for the moderate nationalist SDLP declined by 1.6% while support for Sinn Féin declined slightly by 0.8%. The vote share for the DUP marginally increased by 1% but the party lost electoral transfers, costing it eight seats (see Whitten, 2019). Just weeks later, in the European Parliament elections, patterns evident at the local level were repeated. Alliance leader Naomi Long became the first member of her party to be returned as an MEP (see Haughey and Pow, 2019). Overall, the results of the local and European elections revealed a political landscape in flux as the dual dynamics of Brexit and the impasse at Stormont seemed, to some extent, to be disrupting traditional voting behaviour. Johnson's new Brexit deal then produced the context for a third election of 2019 in Northern Ireland, and the eighth poll in four years for the region.³

2. The Campaign

2.1 *Inter-unionist Tensions*

It was a short but eventful campaign. Billed the ‘Brexit election’, political parties’ campaign pitches all centred on their respective policies on the UK's proposed departure from the EU. Hoping for a similar outcome to the 2017 poll, the DUP sought a mandate to “correct that which could endanger the economic and constitutional position of Northern Ireland” and send Prime Minister Johnson to “the naughty step” over his proposals for the region (DUP, 2019b; DUP 2019c). However, the DUP faced extensive criticism during the campaign for their role in the Brexit process. The UUP accused the party of having “besmirched the good name of unionism and Northern Ireland”, through “incompetence, greed and corruption” (UUP, 2019: 4). However, it agreed with the DUP that Johnson's deal constituted an “existential threat” to the Union (UUP, 2019: 5; DUP, 2019b). A similar view was taken by civic loyalist groups who held a series of protest meetings during the campaign. The largest took place in the Ulster Hall

³ UK parliamentary election held on 7 May 2015; Northern Ireland Assembly election held on 5 May 2016; EU Referendum held on 23 June 2016; Northern Ireland Assembly election held on 2 March 2017; UK parliamentary election held on 8 June 2017; local elections held 2 May 2019; European Parliamentary election held on 23 May 2019.

in Belfast six days before the poll and was styled as a rally to reject Johnson's deal. Around 1000 loyalists attended and the Union flag was flown upside down as a sign that "Ulster is in distress" (Cross, 2019).

Although united in opposition to Johnson's Withdrawal Agreement, inter-unionist tensions were a notable feature of the campaign. While still UUP leader-elect, Steve Aiken pledged to challenge the DUP by running candidates in all of Northern Ireland's 18 constituencies. The DUP's Jeffrey Donaldson described Aiken's plan as "bonkers" (McCormack, 2019a). In an open letter, 25 high-profile unionists urged the party not to stand a candidate in the marginal constituency of North Belfast where DUP incumbent, Nigel Dodds, faced a tight race against Sinn Féin's rising star and the Lord Mayor of Belfast, John Finucane (Hewitt and Rutherford 2019). With reports of threats of loyalist violence against UUP staff circulating, Aiken rowed back on his earlier commitment. Rather than 18, the UUP would contest 16 seats, standing aside in the Sinn Féin safe seat of West Belfast and the crucial marginal, North Belfast. In a reciprocal move, the DUP stood aside in Fermanagh and South Tyrone in support of the UUP's Tom Elliott in his bid to regain the seat he lost to Sinn Féin's Michelle Gildernew in 2017.

2.2 Nationalist Difficulties and Remain Alliances

On the other side of Northern Ireland's political spectrum, Sinn Féin, the SDLP and also the Green Party stood aside in different constituencies in an effort to increase the chance of returning Remain-supporting candidates to Westminster [Table 1]. Electoral agreements or 'pacts' between non-Unionist parties are unusual in Northern Ireland, but the three parties involved cited the exceptional circumstances created by Brexit as the reason for these. The SDLP stepped aside in North Belfast, East Belfast and North Down in the hope of "elect[ing] pro-remain MPs to vote against Brexit and Boris Johnson" (Carroll, 2019). Sinn Féin stepped aside in South Belfast, East Belfast and North Down, asking voters in those constituencies to support "pro-Remain candidates" from other parties (ibid.). Meanwhile, the Green Party leader, Claire Bailey, did not stand as a candidate in South Belfast and urged her would-be supporters to back the SDLP's Claire Hanna instead (*Irish Times*, 2019). The decisions taken by these three pro-Remain parties was a point of sharp contention. Facing a difficult contest in South Belfast, DUP incumbent Emma Little-Pengelly said choices made by Sinn Féin and Green Party candidates to support her opponent, the SDLP's Claire Hanna, were "not a pro-Remain pact" but one concerned with "nationalism and republicanism" (Black, 2019a). The SDLP were also criticised for aiding the abstentionist Sinn Féin candidate in North Belfast. Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Green Party all refuted accusations that their respective choices were motivated by constitutional questions, each stating instead that these were "unilateral decisions" focused entirely on Brexit (in Black, 2019a).

[Table 1: 'Electoral Pacts': Parties Standing and Not Standing in Marginal Seats in the 2019 Westminster Election]

The only party to run candidates in every constituency were the Alliance Party, who criticised their political rivals for agreeing what party leader, Naomi Long, described as "divisive and sectarian" electoral pacts (Madden, 2019). Long said the UUP's decision not to stand in North Belfast as "truly grim" and accused the party leader of "backtracking on his first promise as leader designate" (BBC News, 2019d). The pro-life, Republican Party, Aontú, added their critique for what leader, and ex-Sinn Féin TD, Peadar Kirby characterised as "the carving up of constituencies". Running on an abstentionist ticket in its first UK general election since it launched in January 2019, Aontú stood in five constituencies, including the key nationalist battlegrounds of Foyle and South Down, where the party underlined their hope of 'splitting the Nationalist vote' by garnering support from otherwise Sinn Féin voters (Breen, 2019).

For Sinn Féin the election was about "which union you want to belong to; Ireland in Europe or Britain" (2019: 6). They urged voters to "send a strong message to the Tory government that we reject their Brexit" (Sinn Féin, 2019: 3). It was, however, a difficult campaign for the party, which was criticised by rival candidates and the public over their abstentionist policy. Under pressure during a televised leaders' debate, the party's leader in Northern Ireland, Michelle O'Neill, insisted "one or two Irish MPs won't make a difference" in Westminster, but her argument was dismissed by politicians from all other parties who cited the extremely tight margins of parliamentary votes in Westminster since the 2017 election (BBC One, 2019). One of the most notable events of the campaign came when

the Sinn Féin candidate for North Belfast, John Finucane was forced to apologise after it emerged that he had been caught urinating in the street earlier in the year. Mr Finucane said he was “very embarrassed and deeply sorry” for what happened and had been issued a community resolution notice for indecent behaviour by the two police officers at the time (BBC News, 2019e). Following the revelation, TUV leader, Jim Allister, wrote to the Northern Ireland Local Government Commissioner for Standards requesting an investigation into the matter as it relates to councillors’ code of conduct (Moriarty, 2019). Whilst battling criticism from outside the party, O’Neill also faced a leadership challenge from party colleague John O’Dowd midway through the campaign. At the party’s Ard Fheis in November, O’Neill won the contest convincingly, receiving 67% of the vote (Bell, 2019b). However, coming in the midst of such an important election, the timing of the challenge was less than ideal.

2.3 Healthcare and Acrimony

In the latter half of the campaign, a crisis in the healthcare system overtook Brexit as the central political issue in Northern Ireland. Medical professionals had been warning of a potential disaster in Northern Ireland’s health service for months, but the endemic problems in the system were amplified during the campaign as the Royal College of Nursing and Unison, the health workers union, both voted to take industrial action over staffing levels and low pay. Salaries for nurses and healthcare workers in Northern Ireland had fallen behind the rest of the UK, a fact that had contributed to the over 3,000 nursing vacancies in Health and Social Care which put pressure of existing nursing staff to meet demand. The decision to strike focused public and political attention on a tangible example of the “stagnation and decay” of public services caused by the prolonged absence of devolved government (Sterling, 2019). As the crisis escalated, the DUP and Sinn Féin both came under pressure to explain and justify their respective roles in the ongoing political impasse.

It was, however, a particularly acrimonious campaign for all parties. Instances of intimidation, and threats and misinformation were experienced by candidates from across the spectrum. In North Belfast, a banner containing allegations about the family of Sinn Féin candidate, John Finucane, were erected in the Tiger’s Bay area. Loyalist banners targeting the SDLP’s Claire Hanna also appeared in South Belfast. These offensive banners were subsequently removed and the PSNI made enquiries. Although accused of involvement by some, the DUP said they were “unaware” of such banners (Edwards, 2019). Elsewhere, leaflets suggesting that a vote for the Alliance Party would allow an “IRA win” were circulated in areas of Bangor (BBC News, 2019f). Alliance candidate for the North Down constituency, Stephen Farry, said the leaflets were not only “disingenuous” but “dangerous” (ibid.). Posters of various candidates were also subject to vandalism. In North Belfast, Sinn Féin posters were stolen, whilst elsewhere those of UUP’s Steve Aiken and Alliance’s Naomi Long were defaced (Black, 2019b). Online abuse was another unfortunate feature of the campaign. Abusive comments were aimed in particular, at the DUP’s Carla Lockhart who endured a torrent of abuse from anonymous online trolls (Young, 2019).

2.4 Northern Ireland as Campaign Topic

In keeping with the convention in UK politics since June 2017, post-Brexit arrangements for Northern Ireland were a key issue in the national political debate during the campaign. Contradictory interpretations of what his EU agreement were promoted by Johnson, who described it as a “great deal” for Northern Ireland (Stewart, Rankin and O’Carroll, 2019), and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn who accused his rival of “misrepresenting” arrangements that “threw Northern Ireland under a bus” (Sky News, 2019). A few days into the campaign, Johnson told a Northern Irish audience they would “absolutely not” have to fill in customs declarations for goods travelling to Great Britain post-Brexit and, if asked to so, he would “direct them to throw that form in the bin” (Stewart, Rankin and O’Carroll, 2019). Responding to the Prime Minister’s comments, Labour’s Shadow Brexit Secretary, Keir Starmer, suggested he “either doesn’t know the details of the deal he has negotiated or isn’t being straight about it” (ibid.). In their first televised debate on November 19, Johnson and Corbyn, clashed over the nature of the arrangements agreed for Northern Ireland post-Brexit. Corbyn accused Johnson of reneging on his commitment made at last year’s DUP conference not to differentiate Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK: “[the Prime Minister] said there would be

no border down the Irish Sea – well there is” (Harte, 2019). Johnson denied this, but the row continued. On 6 December, Jeremy Corbyn revealed a leaked Treasury document about the impact of the proposed deal on Northern Ireland, claiming this proved the Prime Minister was misrepresenting his agreement which would have a “devastating” impact on Northern Ireland. The Conservatives refuted Corbyn’s claims as “complete nonsense”, describing the leaked document as an “immediate assessment, not a detailed analysis” (BBC News, 2019g; Stewart and Perraudin, 2019).

2.5 Campaign Trends and Figures

In Northern Ireland, in an unexpected development, Independent Unionist Lady Sylvia Hermon announced her resignation from public life after 18 years of service as MP for North Down. The 64-year-old said she was stepping back to spend more time with her family. Responding to the announcement, Leo Varadkar described Hermon as an “honourable and brave politician”, while Northern Ireland Secretary Julian Smith said her “integrity, passion and commitment to Northern Ireland” had been outstanding (BBC News, 2019h). North Down is a traditionally unionist constituency but had voted by a slim 52% majority in favour of remain in the UK’s EU Referendum in 2016. Hermon’s retirement left the DUP, UUP and Alliance all battling to replace her. A second resignation announcement came from the DUP’s David Simpson. First elected as MP for Upper Bann in 2005, Simpson had been a significant figure in the party for decades. He made his decision to step down following reports of an affair with a party colleague (McCormack, 2019b).

After all electoral pacts, tactical withdrawals, and political retirements were accounted for, 102 candidates were set to compete for Northern Ireland’s 18 parliamentary seats. This was a slight decrease from the 109 candidates of 2017, which was itself a significant decrease from the 138 who had run in 2015. Of the 102 candidates, 28 were female, representing 27.5% of those standing, and 74 were male, representing 72.5%. As Table 2 indicates, the gender ratio in the 2019 candidate list represented a reversal in what been a positive trend toward greater representation of women in Northern Irish politics.

[Table 2: Number of Northern Ireland Candidates in UK General Elections by Party and Gender 2010 – 2019]

Continuing an upward trend, the number of people register to vote in the 2019 general election was the largest ever in Northern Ireland at 1,298,971, an increase of 51,273 on the 2017 general election. The number of eligible voters rose across all 18 constituencies, but the greatest increases occurred in the marginal constituencies of Foyle, North Belfast and South Belfast, with 4,022 new voters in Foyle, 3,986 in North Belfast and 3,879 in South Belfast (EONI, 2019). In these constituencies, such numbers are significant. In the 2017 general election, Sinn Féin’s Elisha McCallion took the Foyle seat from SDLP’s Mark Durkan with just 169 votes. In South Belfast, SDLP’s Alasdair McDonnell had lost to the DUP’s Emma Little-Pengelly by 1,996 more votes. In North Belfast, the DUP’s Nigel Dodds won with 2,081 votes more than his closest rival, Sinn Féin’s John Finucane (UK Parliament, 2020). In view of the tight margins and increased electoral registration, the choices of new voters could be decisive.

3 The Result

3.1 Breaking Walls and Precedents

New political ground was broken in the 2019 UK election. Promising to “Get Brexit Done”, secured Johnson a landslide victory. The Conservatives won 365 seats (+48), including many in the so-called “Red Wall” of traditional Labour heartlands spanning North England and the Midlands. Labour lost 60 seats, winning 202. The SNP were returned as the third largest party, winning 48 seats in Scotland (+13), as the Liberal Democrats endured their worst election result in decades, securing just 12 seats.

[Table 3: United Kingdom Results of Election to UK Parliament, held on December 12, 2019]

In Northern Ireland, it was a bruising election result for the DUP. Though still winning the highest percentage share of the vote with 30.6%, the party saw their support decline by 5.4% and lost two key Belfast seats. In one of the most symbolic seat changes of election night, the DUP's deputy leader, Nigel Dodds, lost his North Belfast seat to Sinn Féin's John Finucane, polling a slim 1,943 vote majority. In South Belfast, the DUP's Emma Little-Pengelly lost to Claire Hanna of the SDLP by 15,401 votes, a huge turn-around after the DUP won the seat from the SDLP by 1,996 votes in 2017. Though retaining their position as second largest party, Sinn Féin received only 22.8% of votes, a decline of 6.7% from their 2017 share. The party's Elisha McCallion lost her seat in Foyle to the SDLP leader, Colum Eastwood. This provided the SDLP with another convincing comeback, as Eastwood received 17,110 votes more than McCallion, who had taken the seat from Mark Durkan in 2017 with a majority of just 169 votes. However, Sinn Féin's loss in Foyle, was tempered by their gain in North Belfast, leading to a mixed result overall.

[Table 4: Northern Ireland Results of Election to UK Parliament, held on December 12, 2019]

Winning a seat from Sinn Féin in Foyle and the DUP in South Belfast, the SDLP enjoyed their best result in a general election since 2005. The party received 14.9% of the total vote, an increase of 3.2%. Support for the UUP also increased to 11.7%, an increase of 1.4% on its 2017 results, but still shy of the 16% they received in 2015. While a positive trajectory, the UUP's increase in support did not win any seats, but the party came very close. The previous holder of the marginal constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Tom Elliot, was defeated by the incumbent Sinn Féin MP, Michelle Gildernew, by just 57 votes. Meanwhile, continuing an exceptionally successful year, support for the Alliance Party jumped significantly. The party received 16.8% of the overall vote, an increase of 8.8% and Alliance's highest in any Westminster poll, surpassing the SDLP to become the third largest party in Northern Ireland in terms of vote share. Alliance deputy leader, Stephen Farry, won North Down with 18,358 votes to the DUP's 15,390, meaning the constituency would be represented in Westminster by a non-unionist politician for the first time. With two seat gains for the SDLP, one for Alliance, and no change in the number of Sinn Féin representatives, Northern Ireland also elected more nationalists than unionists to Westminster for the first time.

Support for the Green Party declined by 0.7%, a result partly reflecting the decision to stand aside for pro-Remain candidates in all but three seats. UKIP and the Conservatives failed to gain electoral ground, each receiving only 0.2% of the overall vote, as in 2017. By contrast, building on their success in the local election in May, PBPA secured 1.2% of the vote, an increase of 0.2%, with MLA Gerry Carrol polling particularly well in West Belfast. In its first general election, the pro-choice, republican party, Aontú, made an impressive debut, received 1.2% of the vote, becoming the sixth largest party in Northern Ireland.

3.2 The Brexit Election?

It could be argued that the election result in Northern Ireland was simultaneously about Brexit and not. Constituencies that supported Remain in the UK's EU Referendum in 2016 broadly returned pro-Remain candidates; those that supported Leave returned pro-Brexit candidates. North Belfast and South Belfast were both pro-Remain constituencies in 2016 and, in 2019, transferred from the pro-Brexit DUP to pro-Remain Sinn Féin and the SDLP respectively. Though Sylvia Hermon stepped down from the pro-Remain constituency of North Down, her seat was taken by the pro-Remain Alliance, not the pro-Brexit DUP. The only constituency not to echo the 2016 Referendum, East Londonderry, was held by incumbent Gregory Campbell of the DUP. Three of the four seat changes in the 2019 general election, and results in 17 of the 18 constituencies, can be explained with reference to the 2016 Referendum result. Broadly, then, the 2019 election suggested Brexit has had a cross-cutting effect in Northern Irish politics.

However, a case could also be made that this election was defiantly *not* about Brexit in Northern Ireland. Parties orientated their campaigns around Brexit, but the political narrative was overtaken by a crisis in the healthcare system, exacerbated by the lack of devolved government. A survey carried out shortly after the election found healthcare to be the most important issue among Northern Irish voters, closely followed by societal peace, with

issues of identity and legacy, which have traditionally dominated political discourse, being ranked seventh and tenth respectively.⁴ Such findings suggest the priorities of Northern Ireland's electorate are shifting.

[Figure 1: Relative Importance of Public Policy Areas in Northern Ireland – February 2020]

The 2019 general election in Northern Ireland can be understood as the third in a trilogy of potentially transformative electoral events in a single year. As Table 5 indicates, there was a significant rise in support for non-aligned (neither nationalist or unionist) candidates at the Local Elections, the European Parliamentary Election and finally the General Election. This mirrored a demographic shift away from the traditional identities of unionist and nationalist in broader society. Since 1998, there has been a steady decline in the proportion of people identifying with either tradition in Northern Ireland, with the latest figures showing 26% categorising themselves as unionist, 21% as nationalist, and 50% as neither (NILT, 2018). Conversely, since 1998 government institutions in Northern Ireland have operated according to the assumption that it is a society 'deeply divided' between just two communities – unionist and nationalist. In the long-term, the apparent reordering of priorities and identities in Northern Ireland is likely to mean that electoral support becomes more contingent on political competence than ethno-nationalist labels.

[Table 5: Vote Share of Unionist, Nationalist, Neither Candidates in Northern Ireland Elections 2014 – 2019]

In the short-term, Boris Johnson's electoral victory refocused Northern Ireland's main parties on restoring power-sharing. Within a month of the Westminster poll, the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly was restored. Shortly thereafter, Johnson's 80 seat majority allowed him to pass his Withdrawal Agreement Bill at Westminster despite the opposition of all Northern Ireland's new MPs. In an under-appreciated political first, representatives from the DUP, SDLP and Alliance together added their names to several amendments to the Bill in an attempt to secure 'unfettered access' for Northern Irish goods to the Great British market post-Brexit. While these efforts failed, they were indicative of a new kind of 'negative unity' among Northern Ireland's representatives in Westminster. However, the ease with which Johnson's deal now passed at Westminster revealed how difficult it is for even a united group of Northern Irish MPs to influence a UK government with a strong majority.

Now enshrined in international law, the provisions of Johnson's UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement will fundamentally change Northern Ireland's economic position in the UK. The nature of any future UK-EU trade deal will determine how much this affects the Northern Ireland. However, if the electoral salience of public service delivery and economic wellbeing continues to trump that of national identity and legacy issues, political debate in Northern Ireland will need to change. Meanwhile, it remains to be seen how political structures established on the assumption of a deeply divided society can adapt to an increasingly diverse Northern Irish political realities.

2 Conclusion

The results of the 2019 general election were historic. For the first time ever, Northern Ireland returned more non-unionist MPs than unionist MPs to Westminster. Moreover, all of its representatives strongly opposed the central policy of the new UK government, to 'Get Brexit Done' by passing Boris Johnson's renegotiated Withdrawal Agreement, including differential treatment for Northern Ireland. Joint attempts by the region's 11 sitting MPs⁵ to amend the Bill failed, but their joint efforts were indicative of the changing politics of Northern Ireland. The 'negative unity' between DUP, SDLP, Alliance and Sinn Féin (in absentia) MPs, is premised on the likely impact of the government's Brexit policy on Northern Ireland's economic wellbeing, and not on issues of national identity or the border which have traditionally dominated Northern Irish politics.

While the solidarity between Northern Ireland's political parties in respect to Brexit should not be overstated, if the societal trend away from traditional ethno-nationalist identities continues, a reordering of the electorate's priorities is

⁴ An online survey commissioned by detail.tv and carried out by Lucid Talk. Polling took place between 31st January and 3rd February 2020, with 1,871 responses from Northern Ireland and 1,130 from the Republic of Ireland, representative by gender, age, area of residence and community background in both sample groups.

⁵ Sinn Féin's MPs continue to abstain from Westminster.

likely to follow. Similarly, if the distance between Stormont and Westminster caused by Brexit continues to grow, its effect could be transformative, not just for Northern Ireland, but for the whole of an increasingly disUnited Kingdom.

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Figure 1: Relative Importance of Public Policy Areas in Northern Ireland – February 2020

Source: Compiled from Lucid Talk, 26 February, 2020‘The detail – NI and ROI Poll-Projects’; data available: *Lucid Talk* (<https://www.lucidtalk.co.uk/single-post/2020/02/26/The-detail—NI-and-ROI-Poll-Projects>).

Table 1: ‘Electoral Pacts’: Parties Standing and Not Standing in Five Marginal Seats in the 2019 Westminster Election

CONSTITUENCY	Incumbent	Competing	NOT Competing*
Belfast East	DUP	Alliance, UUP	SDLP, Greens, Sinn Féin
Belfast North	DUP	Sinn Féin, Alliance	SDLP, Greens, UUP
Belfast South	DUP	SDLP, Alliance, UUP, AONT	Sinn Féin, Greens
Belfast West	SF	DUP, SDLP, Alliance, PBP, AONT	UUP
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	SF	UUP, Alliance, SDLP, IND	DUP
North Down	Independent	DUP, UUP, Alliance, NI Conservatives	Sinn Féin, SDLP, Greens

*Parties are only listed as ‘not competing’ if a specific decision was announced to stand aside for the purpose of maximising the vote of a different party.

Source: Compiled from ‘Statement of Persons Nominated and Notice of Poll’, 2019; available from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (<https://www.eoni.org.uk/Elections/Election-results-and-statistics>)

Table 2: Number of Northern Ireland Candidates in UK General Elections by Party and Gender, 2010 – 2019

Year	2010	2015	2017	2019
<i>Gender Ratio [Candidates]</i>	84 Male 24 Female	105 Male 33 Female	73 Male 36 Female	74 Male 28 Female
Total	108	138	108	102
<i>Gender Ratio [Elected]</i>	14 Male 4 Female	16 Male 2 Female	14 Male 4 Female	14 Male 4 Female

Source: Compiled from data available via the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (<https://www.eoni.org.uk/Elections/Election-results-and-statistics>)

Table 3: United Kingdom Results of Election to UK Parliament, held on December 12, 2019

PARTY	FIRST PREFERENCE VOTES			SEATS WON	
	No.	%	% Change	No.	Change
<i>Conservatives</i>	13,966,451	43.6	+1.2	365	+47
<i>Labour</i>	10,295,912	32.2	-7.8	203	-59
<i>Lib Dems</i>	3,696,419	11.5	+4.2	11	-1
<i>SNP</i>	1,242,380	3.9	+0.8	48	+13
<i>Plaid Cymru</i>	153,265	0.5	0	4	0
<i>DUP</i>	244,127	0.8	-0.1	8	-2
<i>Sinn Féin</i>	181,853	0.6	-0.2	7	0
<i>SDLP</i>	118,737	0.4	+0.1	2	+2
<i>Greens</i>	865,707	2.4	+1.1	1	0
<i>Alliance</i>	134,115	0.4	+0.2	1	+1
<i>Others</i> ⁶	1,115,102	3.0 ⁷	N/A		
Electorate: 47,568,611			Turnout (%): 67.3%		

Source: Compiled from data available on BBC News General Election; available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2019/results>

⁶ **Others:** The Brexit Party; Ulster Unionist Party; The Yorkshire Party; UKIP; Liberal Party; Independent Group for Change; Aontú; Monster Raving Loony Party; Christian Peoples Alliance; Social Democratic Party; Animal Welfare Party; English Democrats; Libertarian; Workers Revolutionary Party; Advance Together; Other Independents.

⁷ Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding in Others category.

Table 4: Northern Ireland Results of Election to UK Parliament, held on December 12, 2019

PARTY	FIRST PREFERENCE VOTES			SEATS WON	
	No.	%	% Change	No.	Change
<i>DUP</i>	244,128	30.6	-5.4	8	-2
<i>Sinn Féin</i>	181,853	22.8	-6.7	7	0
<i>Alliance</i>	134,115	16.8	+8.8	1	+1
<i>SDLP</i>	118,737	14.9	+3.1	2	+2
<i>UUP</i>	93,123	11.7	+1.4	0	
<i>Aontú</i>	9,814	1.2	+1.2	0	
<i>PBP</i>	7,526	1.2	+0.2		
<i>Conservatives</i>	5,433	0.7	-		
<i>Greens</i>	1,996	0.2	-0.7		
<i>UKIP</i>	1,687	0.2			
Electorate: 1,293,971 Votes Polled: 803,367 Turnout (%): 62.09					

Source: Compiled from data available via the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (<https://www.eoni.org.uk/Elections/Election-results-and-statistics>)

Table 5: Vote Share of for Unionist, Nationalist, or Neither Unionist or Nationalist Candidates in Northern Ireland Elections 2014 – 2019

	Unionist ⁸	Nationalist ⁹	Neither ¹⁰
General Election			
2015	50.3% (360,801)	39.9% (286,092)	9.9% (70,810)
2017	48.9% (398,921)	41.8% (340,551)	8.9% (72,712)
2019	42.9% (344,371)	39.6% (317,930)	17.2% (137,798)
Local Elections			
2014	45.9% (541,627)	38.4% (241,839)	16.8% (86,454)
2019	41.2% (284,618)	35.2% (256,675)	21.6% (136,693)
European Parliament			
2014	51.0% (319,135)	38.6% (241,407)	10.5% (65,583)
2019	43.0% (245,841)	35.9% (205,540)	21.2% (121,066)

⁸ **Unionist:** DUP, UUP, UKUP, TUV, UKIP, Conservative, Independent Unionists, BNP, Community Partnership, South Belfast Unionists, Democrats and Veterans.

⁹ **Nationalist:** Sinn Féin, SDLP, PBPA, Aontú, Workers Party, Éirígí, Independent Nationalists.

¹⁰ **Neither:** Alliance, Green Party NI, NI21, CISTA, Democracy First, Socialist Party, FAF, Independents, Labour Alternative.

Source: Compiled from data available via ARK (<https://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/>) 2019 and the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (<https://www.eoni.org.uk/Elections/Election-results-and-statistics>).