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## **#LE19 - a turning of the tide? Report of local elections in Northern Ireland, 2019**

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# #LE19 – a turning of the tide?

Report of Local Elections in Northern Ireland, 2019

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## Abstract

Otherwise routine local elections in Northern Ireland on 2 May 2019 were bestowed unusual significance by exceptional circumstance. A prolonged stalemate between the two largest political parties had left Northern Ireland without a devolved government for over two years; meanwhile, arrangements for the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland had been central in the turbulent 'Brexit' process engulfing the UK government. Meaning, that the local elections in 2019 would be a litmus test of public opinion in Northern Ireland at a time when the place more often spoken about than spoken for. In the event, results were mixed; there were signs of electoral continuity and others of political flux. Two trends will likely be significant in the long term. First, the consolidation of ethno-nationally defined electorates on the part of the DUP and Sinn Féin following the continued decline in support for the moderate unionist UUP and moderate nationalist SDLP. Second, a surge in support for the cross-community Alliance Party and a notable increase in support for the non-aligned Green Party and People Before Profit Alliance, alongside Independent candidates, suggests diversification in the issues directing Northern Irish voters' allegiance, and at least a partial decline in the electoral salience of the constitutional question.

## Key Terms

Northern Ireland; United Kingdom; local elections; campaign; Brexit, unionism; nationalism; political parties.

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## 1. Introduction

It was an over-lobbied and under-represented electorate that went to the polls on 2 May 2019. Northern Ireland had been without devolved government for 836 days<sup>2</sup> and was about to partake in the fifth region-wide election in less than three years.<sup>3</sup> An inability to achieve political consensus appeared to be in vogue. In the process of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union ('Brexit'), arrangements for the border on the island of Ireland have played a central and controversial role. It proved the most controversial issue of UK-EU withdrawal negotiations and agreed arrangements were at the centre of the struggle and failure of the UK government under Theresa May's premiership to pass the draft UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement through Parliament and into UK law.<sup>4</sup>

The strategic and influential position of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) as confidence-and-supply-partners of Prime Minister Theresa May's minority Conservative government in Westminster had endowed the party's ten MPs with an effective veto on the terms of the draft UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement, including arrangements intended to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (the so-called 'backstop') during attempts to ratify the draft UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement in the UK Parliament. Opposition to the backstop arrangements contained in the draft UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement were sustained across unionist political parties in Northern Ireland including the previously remain supporting Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). Support for the draft UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement, including the backstop, had however been clearly voiced by leaders from among

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<sup>2</sup> Northern Ireland has been without devolved government since the collapse of the power-sharing Executive on 16 January 2017. For a live tally of the number of days past without government see: <https://howlonghasnorthernirelandnothadagovernment.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly elections were held on 5 May 2016; Northern Ireland took part in UK's Referendum on EU Membership on 23 June 2016; Northern Ireland Assembly elections were held on 2 March 2017 following the collapse of the Executive; Northern Ireland took part in UK General Election on 8 June 2017.

<sup>4</sup> For an account of the contested position of Northern Ireland in the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement see Phinnemore and Hayward 2018; for an overview of the 'Irish Backstop' and explanation of why it has proved so controversial in domestic UK politics see Menon et al 2019.

traditionally unionist supporting voices within the farming, agriculture and business sectors (see BBC News 15.11.2018; Dickson 23.11.2018). Indeed, the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement had gained widespread support in Northern Ireland, receiving public endorsements from business leaders, trade unions, voluntary community sector leaders, and even the head of Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICCI 2018; Gorman 2018; Smith 2019; Campbell 2019). All non-unionist political parties in Northern Ireland supported ‘remain’ during the UK’s EU Referendum campaign and have since advocated for ‘soft Brexit’ options with particular arrangements for Northern Ireland (see Alliance 2017a; Alliance 2017b; Bailey 2018; SDLP 2019; Sinn Féin 2017). Following the publication of the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement, Sinn Féin, the SDLP, Alliance and the Greens all publicly supported its terms, including the ‘backstop’ which they characterised as a necessary last resort, while also advocating for another referendum on the terms of exit and keeping open the option of revoking Article 50 TEU (see O’Neill, Eastwood, Long and Bailey 2019).

A variety of attitudinal surveys carried out in Northern Ireland since the UK’s EU Referendum had found consistent support for remaining in the EU amongst the Northern Irish public, with an average majority of around 60% (see Pow and Garry 2018; Pow and Garry 2019; White 2018; White 2019). Recent polls in Northern Ireland have also found cross-community support for so-called soft Brexit options; in March 2019 an Ipsos Mori survey found 67% of people in Northern Ireland would support the whole of the UK staying in the EU single market and customs union but it is this kind of soft-Brexit scenario that is most feared by hard-line ‘Brexiters’ politicians in Westminster (Leahy 2019; see also Garry *et al.* 2018). While support for soft-Brexit options and the terms of the draft UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement indicates that the process of UK’s withdrawal from the EU is having a similar impact in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the UK (in that it is cross-cutting traditional political divides), the extent to which this is so ought not to be overstated. Voting patterns in

the UK's EU Referendum in 2016 correlated closely with individuals' ethno-nationalist and religious backgrounds; subsequent analysis showed 88% of Nationalists voted to remain in the EU while 66% of Unionists voted to leave (see Garry 2016). In the March 2019 Ipsos Mori survey, while 62% overall supported Northern Ireland remaining in the Single Market and Customs Union regardless of what the rest of the UK does. This majority represented only 22% of unionist participants surveyed, 78% of whom supported Northern Ireland sticking with whatever Brexit arrangements are negotiated for the rest of the UK (White, 2018 p. 10). Prior to the local elections then, the impact of Brexit on Northern Irish politics had so far been mixed, on the one hand disrupting traditional political allegiances while on the other reinforcing longstanding divisions.

Notwithstanding declarations of unwavering commitment to the restoration of devolution on the part of British and Irish governments, accusations of a lack of urgency to restore power-sharing government in Northern Ireland were arguably substantiated by the clear capacity issues of a UK government struggling under an all-encompassing Brexit process (see Bradley 2018; Institute for Government 2019). The tragic murder of one of Northern Ireland's "leading lights", 29-year old journalist Lyra McKee in April 2019 at the hands of dissident republican group the New IRA brought a new impetus to efforts to restore power-sharing (BBC News 19.04.2019; see also BBC News 23.04.2019 and BBC News 24.04.2019).

Pressure came from the unlikely source of a local priest Father Martin Magill who rebuked political leaders during Ms McKee's funeral in St Anne's Cathedral in Belfast. Those present included Prime Minister Theresa May, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and leaders of all the main political parties in Northern Ireland. A standing ovation and applause from congregants sent what Mrs May and Mr Varadkar later described as "the unmistakable message" to all political leaders that the people across Northern Ireland want to see "a new momentum for political progress" (see Maguire 26.04.2019). Fr. Magill's words led to a joint statement some days

later announcing the recommencement of talks which would begin on 7 May 2019, after the local elections (BBC News 25.04.2019).

Taken together, the internal political stalemate and UK-wide political impasse had led to an unenviable situation whereby Northern Ireland had, for more than two years, been a fulcrum on which EU and UK politics had turned but was without full democratic representation.

Such was the backdrop for the local elections held across the region on 2 May 2019 in what would be a litmus test of voters' perspectives in these unprecedented days.

## **2. The Campaign**

### *2.1 Candidates: #LE19*

Eight hundred and nineteen candidates campaigned in pursuit of 462 seats across Northern Ireland's 11 local council areas; a decrease from the 893 candidates who sought election in 2014. As Table One indicates, the number of DUP candidates decreased slightly from 2014 while Sinn Féin slightly increased their total, suggesting perhaps the latter were more optimistic than the former about the prospect of electoral gain. The UUP ran the same number of candidates while the SDLP ran 27% fewer than in 2014, suggesting that both moderate parties were aiming to consolidate existing support without pushing for new seats. Smaller unionist parties, the TUV, UKIP and PUP ran significantly fewer candidates than in 2014 in a shift that perhaps indicates a diminishing support base since their successes in 2014, particularly for UKIP and TUV.<sup>5</sup> Alliance, the Green Party and PBPA increased their

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<sup>5</sup> In 2014 local elections 13 TUV candidates were elected and 3 UKIP candidates were elected, the parties received 4.5% and 1.5% of FP votes respectively (see Whyte and Kelly 2015; Matthews 201: 437/8). For both parties this was the strongest showing ever in Northern Ireland local elections and an increase from the 6 TUV candidates (2% FP votes) and 1 UKIP candidate (0.4% FP votes) elected in 2011 (see Whyte 2011).

total number of candidates by 2%, 86% and 500% respectively with all three parties hoping to break new ground, fielding candidates in new District Electoral Areas (DEAs).

[Insert Table 1]

An eligible electorate of 1,305,553 in Northern Ireland was the largest ever and an increase from the 1,243,649 in 2014. A significant jump in voter registration had followed the introduction of online registration which was rolled out on 18 June 2018 (Electoral Office of Northern Ireland [EONI], 2019). Electronic registration has been available to voters in England, Scotland and Wales from 2014 onwards. Northern Ireland's Chief electoral Officer Virginia McVea spoke of the "unprecedented" number of online applications received, over 100,000 since the service began, with more than 50,000 of these made in 2019 and in advance of the local elections. Around 80% of the applications to be added to the electoral register since the introduction of electronic registration had been made online (EONI 2019; Harte 30.04.2019). Local elections of 2019 therefore saw a significant number of voters who had not previously voted or had not done so for some time.

## *2.2 A Constitutional Campaign*

Election campaigns in Northern Ireland have always featured the language of ethno-national identity and constitutional futures, however, this characteristic was amplified by circumstance in the run up to the May 2019 vote.

Northern Ireland's two largest parties campaigned on issues beyond the mandate of local government. Both the DUP and Sinn Féin emphasized what they perceived to be existential threats posed by the prospect of each-others' electoral success. Speaking at her party's campaign launch, DUP leader Arlene Foster urged all unionist voters to give the DUP their first preference vote arguing that not doing so "[ran] the risk of dividing unionism...returning

fewer unionist councillors...[and] bolstering Sinn Féin demands for a divisive” Irish border poll (see Kelly 18.04.2019; Devenport 18.04.2019). Accompanying their commitment to cut council rates and grant more powers to the local level, the DUP manifesto included substantial sections on issues outside the scope of local councils. Emphasis was placed on the strategic position of the 10 DUP MP’s in Westminster and Ms Foster’s message was strongly restated about the risk posed to “the Union” by “vote shredding” if first preference was given to any other unionist party (DUP 2019 p. 29).

Advocating antithetical positions but on similar issues, Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald described the local election as, “an opportunity for voters to say the time is up for Brexit and the time is up for DUP-Tory cuts”, during the launch of her party’s campaign in the unlikely surroundings of unionist Ballymena (Kelly 18.04.2019). Focusing on national and constitutional matters, Ms McDonald described Brexit as “political vandalism” and urged voters to send a message to the Conservative government in what she characterised as “a local election with a national vision” (Kelly 18.04.2019; McClafferty 15.04.2019). Alongside policies for job creation, housing, policing and local environmental initiatives, the Sinn Féin manifesto emphasised their support for a referendum on Irish Unity arguing that, “as a result of Brexit, Ireland has been presented with a unique political opportunity to end the trauma of partition” (SF, 2019 p. 16). Justifications for their respective positions and accusations of their opponents’ intransigence in the context of the ongoing political deadlock in Northern Ireland were also evident in both the DUP and Sinn Féin campaign manifestos and rhetoric. Assessment on the part of the DUP that the Assembly “should never have been collapsed” accompanied their assertion that “we do not need to choose between a government and negotiations”; this was an explicit attack on their previous partners in power-sharing government and one that was reciprocated in Sinn Féin’s declaration that “we need to continue to stand up to the DUP...to stand against arrogance, sectarianism, homophobia and

racism” (DUP 2019 p. 11; Sinn Féin 2019 p. 5); all of which reflects the antagonistic, divisive atmosphere in which this campaign took place.

### *2.3 Battle for the Centre and Diverse Alternatives*

A contest for the centre ground of Northern Irish politics was evident during the campaign as Northern Ireland’s smaller parties battled to characterise themselves as alternatives to the status quo of DUP/Sinn Féin dominance. Speaking at her party’s campaign launch, Alliance Party leader Naomi Long urged voters to “break the cycle” of green and orange politics in Northern Ireland by supporting the 84 candidates her cross-community party were running (McCormack, 17.04.2019). In a similar appeal to voters, Green Party leader Claire Bailey also called on the electorate to “break the cycle” by lending their support to her party who committed to “speak truth to power” and tackle climate change (McCormack 18.04.2019; Green Party 2019 p. 2). In keeping with their brand, the 10 Green Party manifesto pledges focused on local actions to mitigate global climate changes including ensuring that all councils go single-use plastic free, providing free sanitary products and improving air quality standards (Green Party 2019). Both the Alliance Party and Green Party manifestos were ostensibly focused on policies specific to local government. Alliance Party proposals were exclusive to areas in which local councils have authority, albeit they contextualised their pledges with reference to Brexit and the two largest parties’ intransigence; they warned voters that “better is possible...but it isn’t inevitable” and urged them to “demand it” by voting for Alliance (2019 p. 3). Similar rhetoric, and a similar approach, was used by the UUP in their manifesto, the content of which was devoted entirely to local policies, specified by district electoral area (UUP, 2019). A forward from UUP party leader Robbie Butler described the context for the election as significant “political and legal upheaval due to

Brexit” and warned voters not to allow “the dysfunctionality, chaos and ineptitude” of the two main political parties to “spread” (UUP 2019 p. 2). As the most consistent and vocal pro-European party in Northern Ireland, it is unsurprising that the context of Brexit, characterised as “the most immediate and fundamental political, economic and constitutional challenge facing communities, businesses and people across these islands”, was at the centre of the SDLP’s campaign (SDLP 2019 p. 4). In their comprehensive manifesto, the SDLP pledged to establish Brexit Committees on every council to prepare for potential impacts of changes resulting from the UK’s EU withdrawal (5); theirs was a campaign for local change in view of national and regional shifts.

One of just two parties who stood UK-wide in the 2019 local elections, UKIP regional manager Paul Girvan urged Northern Irish voters to support his party as the “authentic voice of Brexit” (BBC News 30.04.2019). Standing on a manifesto that promised to end mass uncontrolled immigration, abolish the BBC licence fee and transfer more decision-making powers to local councils as a way of addressing the “democratic deficit of the past two years”, UKIP would offer “the representation to people that they have been denied” (BBC News 30.04.2019). Under a recently elected leadership team, the Northern Ireland Conservative Party stated their “wish to represent a truly positive alternative” to the “squabble and bicker” of “negative politics in Northern Ireland” (NI Conservatives 04.03.2019). In a nod to the historic lack of electoral success the party acknowledged that they “must prove to the public we deserve their support” and sought to do so in the 2019 local elections (NI Conservatives 04.03.2019).

Joining the growing number of parties contesting elections on both sides of the border, the 2019 local elections were the first time that recently formed pro-Life Republican Party, Aontú, stood for election. Former TD Peadar Tóibíín established the new party after refusing to accept Sinn Féin party policy on the issue of abortion prior to the referendum on the Eighth

Amendment to the constitution in the Republic of Ireland. Mr. Tóibín's all-Ireland party ran 16 candidates in the local elections in Northern Ireland while preparing for upcoming local elections south of the border. During an extensive 32-county campaign, the new party leader Peadar Toibin repeatedly emphasised the breadth of the new party's policies, highlighting the slogan of 'Life. Unity. Economic Justice' and advocating a vision of socialist economics, moral conservatism and constitutional republicanism. The fact that it was the issue of abortion that unified party candidates from different nationalist political origins, however, made it difficult to counter the prevailing assessment that pro-life would be the party's definitive feature (Aontú 2019; Donnelly 04.04.2019). On the opposite end of the policy spectrum, the PBPA set out to make electoral gains with a 500% increase in the number of candidates. PBPA ran a dynamic, locally focused and social media driven campaign. Featuring a cadre of young, first time candidates, the party focused on the impact of welfare reforms on inner-city communities of Belfast and Derry and advocated for an increase of investment in local services. PBPA urged the electorate to vote for change and to send a message to existing politicians that they are "far too comfortable" (Ferguson in PBPA Belfast 30.04.2019).

#### *2.4 Inflammatory Rhetoric*

The most controversial event of the relatively short campaign revolved around the content of a UUP leaflet. A campaign leaflet circulated in support of UUP East Belfast candidates Jim Rodgers and Peter Johnson alleged links between the Alliance Party and the Provisional IRA, stating that: "the Alliance Party on Belfast City Council has demonstrated repeatedly during the lifetime of the council that they are closely aligned to Sinn Féin. Their record shows time and time again they vote with the Provisional IRA's political wing" (cited in Bell

17.04.2019). The UUP distanced themselves from the content of the leaflet, making clear in a statement that it had not been sanctioned by the party, saying: “this was not a central UUP message. It is included in a leaflet distributed in the Ormiston DEA. The matter has been referred to Party Officers” (Bell 17.04.2019). Notwithstanding the denouncement, councillor Jim Rodgers later defended the language of the leaflet saying that he did not accept that the IRA had disbanded and “the voting record will show Alliance have aligned with Sinn Féin which is the political wing of the Provisional IRA” (ibid). Speaking in response, Alliance Party leader Naomi Long said the content was “misinformation” a “deliberate attempt to link Alliance to the IRA” and one that put her representatives at risk (Simpson 07.05.2019). Use of inflammatory language was not exclusive to the UUP leaflet episode. The TUV manifesto used typically bombastic rhetoric as the party outlined the “shocking betrayal” of Northern Ireland through the “pernicious backstop” (2019 p. 2); it described the “humiliation inflicted” by the “DUP’s abuse of power” (6) and called for the “scourge of Stormont” to be stopped by shutting down devolution and instead “go for direct rule” (8).

### **3. The Result**

#### *3.1 Two Party Dominance*

Upholding electoral consistency, the DUP and Sinn Féin were returned as the two largest parties. Despite a marginal increase in percentage share of first preference vote (+1.0%) the DUP lost 8 seats returning a total of 122 candidates. The party did however carve out some new territory in geography and diversity as they gained two new seats on Belfast City Council and elected the party’s first ever openly gay candidate. Commenting on the election of Alison Bennington to Antrim and Newtownabbey Council, DUP East Belfast MP Gavin Robinson described it as a “good news story”; party leader Arlene Foster later said she was

“delighted” with Ms Bennington’s success. A less positive perspective was taken by TUV leader Jim Allister who claimed that DUP members were “shocked by the decision” to let Ms. Bennington run. Mr. Allister’s comments were made after a poor showing of support for the TUV who lost 7 seats (-54% representation); there was however a notably good showing for the TUV in the party leader’s constituency of North Antrim where they kept all three seats previously held. Such a result is a good indication for hopeful successors of Mr Allister although it is also likely to have been influenced by dissatisfaction with the DUP following the recent trials of the sitting DUP MP Iain Paisley Jr. (Fealty, 10.05.2019).

Sinn Féin came a close second to the DUP in first preference votes, with 23.2% which represented a marginal decrease (-0.8%) from their 2014 share; despite this, following transfers, the party retained the same number of representatives as in 2014 with 105 in total. Overall, it was a mixed result for the party as, on the one hand they won six out of seven seats in the Blackmountain DEA and broke new ground by gaining seats on Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council for the first time; on the other hand, however, five sitting Sinn Féin councillors lost their seats in Derry City and Strabane. There were several notable appointees featured in the list of Sinn Féin’s new councillors: former MP Barry McElduff, forced to resign following the Kingsmill Controversy in 2016, was elected to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council; while in Belfast John Finucane, son of solicitor Pat Finucane who was murdered in front of his wife and children in 1989, was elected on the first, commenting after the result Mr. Finucane said he wanted to “change Belfast for the positive” (BBC News 04.05.2019a).

[Insert Table 2]

### *3.2 A Moderate Fall and an Alternative Rise*

Continuing a long-term trend of electoral decline, both the UUP and SDLP saw a decline in their first preference vote share receiving 14.1% (-2.1%) and 12.0% (-1.6%) respectively, resulting in the loss of 13 UUP seats and 7 SDLP seats having also lost transfers to non-aligned and independent candidates from other parties. In view of the diminished support for moderate unionist and moderate nationalist candidates and little change in the number of seats previously held by DUP and Sinn Féin, the main story of the elections was the significant jump in support for cross-community and non-aligned representatives.

The Alliance Party had its most successful election in decades receiving 11.5% (+4.8%) of first preference votes and 53 seats. Alliance Party leader Naomi Long described this 65% rise in the number of councillors as an “incredible result”. Notably, in the influential Belfast City Council, Alliance won 10 seats meaning the party will continue to hold the balance of power between Unionist and Nationalist representatives. Alliance also doubled their representation on Mid and East Antrim Council and won seats in the north west for the first time as they took two seats from Sinn Féin on Derry and Strabane Council (see Appendix 1). Speaking after the count, Ms. Long noted the significance of gaining Alliance seats beyond the Greater Belfast area and hailed the results as a breakthrough not only for her party but for all cross-community candidates stating that there had been a rejection by many of “tribal politics” (BBC News 04.05.2019a).

The Green Party doubled their representatives at the expense of UUP, gaining four new seats, all in the Belfast area. The Greens success echoed an EU-wide surge in support for candidates advocating green policies as part of what has been one of the most significance political policy breakthroughs of this year – a greening of the mainstream agenda (Fealty, 10.05.2019). An historic result for the PBPA saw the party win three seats in Belfast while former Stormont MLA Eamon McCann was granted a return to frontline politics, winning a seat on Derry City and Strabane Council. PBPA success came at the expense of Sinn Féin’s

demise in what have traditionally been heartland areas for the party in West Belfast and Derry; PBPA also took a seat from the PUP who joined the UUP and TUV in losing support in the shadows of a DUP consolidation of the unionist vote and non-aligned candidates seeming to pick up the votes of those seeking political alternatives. A substantial increase in the number of Independents returned and the politically eclectic nature of the group suggests a strong degree of voter disaffection with the main parties with Independents benefiting from protest ballots.

[Insert Figure 1 and Figure 2]

## **4. Analysis**

### *4.1 Breaking Ground and Changing Course?*

In the twenty-one years since the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998 (hereafter GFA), politics in Northern Ireland has been characterised by: a persistent relevance of Nationalist/Unionist political identities, consolidation of the Unionist vote by the DUP and consolidation of the Nationalist vote by Sinn Féin. While the local election results of 2019 reinforced this long-term trend, the surge in support for cross-community and non-aligned representatives might be the first signs of a diversification in the politics in Northern Ireland which could prove significant for the future of the place.

Northern Ireland has long been understood as a ‘deeply divided’ society split between two ethno-national communities<sup>6</sup>. Since the foundation of the place,<sup>7</sup> the people, politics and

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<sup>6</sup> Literature on Northern Ireland as a deeply divided society is substantial; for an introductory text that adopts a ‘two community’ interpretation see: *Making Sense of the troubles: a history of the Northern Ireland conflict* (McKitterick and McVea, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Literature on the political history of Northern Ireland is also substantial; for an overview of Northern Irish politics prior to 1998 see Aughey and Morrow’s edited volume *Northern Ireland politics* (1996); for a comprehensive overview of Northern Irish political history to present day see O’Leary three volume *A treatise on Northern Ireland* (2019a; 2019b; 2019c).

geography of Northern Ireland have been variously characterised as either Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist or Catholic/Nationalist/Republican<sup>8</sup>. Following the signing of the GFA societal division between Unionism and Nationalism was formally embedded in the structure of government through the requirement for representatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly to register a designation of identity as either ‘Unionist’ ‘Nationalist’ or ‘Other’ (Strand 1 (6)). The innovative three-stranded agreement established a system of power-sharing consociational devolution underpinned by a series of rights-based protections, including the need for cross-community consent to pass key legislation.<sup>9</sup> The validity and efficacy of this power-sharing consociational system for devolved government in Northern Ireland has been subject of heated academic debate; interesting and necessary as said debates are, they are outside the scope of this paper.<sup>10</sup> Leaving aside questions of causality, since the signing of the peace agreement in 1998, electoral support in Northern Ireland has been given to representatives that identify as either unionist or nationalist (see Table 2). Within this broad pattern of a consistently strong support for either nationalist or unionist candidates in Northern Ireland, there has been clear shift in voting behaviour away from the moderate unionism of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) towards the more hard-line unionism of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and, reciprocally, away from the moderate nationalism of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) towards the more hard-line nationalism of Sinn Féin. Simultaneously, however, since 1998, there has been a steady decline in the percentage of the population in Northern Ireland who identify as either Unionist or Nationalist with a growing number who do not consider themselves to be either (see Table 3);

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<sup>8</sup> Hereafter the terms Unionist and Nationalist are used to refer to the opposing ethno-national, political identities in Northern Ireland; these align with terms used in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998, Strand 1 (6)) and those used by political parties and political representatives to self-identify.

<sup>9</sup> Cross-community safeguards include a requirement for weighted majorities of 60% of members present including at least 40% each of unionist and nationalist representatives present and voting; see GFA, 1998: Strand One 5(a) – (e).

<sup>10</sup> For an introduction to the consociational model and overview of perspectives on its operation in Northern Ireland see Taylor (ed) 2009.

the persistent political success of increasingly hard-line Unionist / Nationalist candidates alongside a persistent decline in Unionist / Nationalist as social identities has resulted in a growing discrepancy between the make-up of Northern Irish political representatives and the people they represent (see Hayward and McManus 2019; Whitten 2019).

[Insert Figure 3]

In view of these parallel trends, the 2019 local election results raise existential questions for the future of the region and the nature of its democratic representation. As Table 3 indicates, the number of undeclared or non-aligned candidates elected to local government has steadily increased since the peace agreement in 1998 just as the number of unionist and nationalist candidates has decreased. Given an assumption of the salience of the two ethno-national identities that have defined much of Northern Ireland's history are post-GFA written into its governing architecture, if the trends seen in 2019 continue, Northern Ireland will have some serious questions to address.

[Insert Table 3]

More immediate impacts of these elections are easier to discern. Results demonstrated that the DUP and Sinn Féin have successfully consolidated the ethno-nationalist voter base for unionism and nationalism respectively, a sign that does not bode well for efforts to reach compromise in cross-party talks to restore power-sharing as neither party received a substantial rebuke or commendation of their position. Continued failure of UK-wide parties to achieve success in Northern Ireland elections reaffirmed the political particularity of the place. Yet, at the same time, the surge in support for the Green Party and Alliance Party (sister of Liberal Democrats) suggests at least some similarity in political trends across the UK in an era of Brexit. In contrast to politics in Great Britain however, the cross-cutting dynamic of issues raised by Brexit appear more limited in Northern Ireland due to the ethno-

nationalist nature of the original referendum result in 2016. Brexit therefore seems to be simultaneously reinforcing traditional political divides in Northern Ireland among hard-line Unionist/Nationalist voters, while reigniting political participation among new voters and potentially realigning political identities along new axes.

## **5. Conclusion**

The extent to which shifts evident in the results of the 2019 local elections can be sustained is contingent on the longevity of the factors that can reasonably be assumed to have motivated changes in voting behaviour, namely: the lack of a devolved government in Northern Ireland and the centrality of the place in the Brexit process. While these two factors together created an unprecedented situation in which local elections were bestowed a national and politically existential significance, neither look likely to be resolved in the near future. For better or worse, the process of the UK's withdrawal from the EU will define the structure of the UK economy, politics and society for decades to come; the restoration and reformation of government in Northern Ireland is to a great extent contingent on the outcome of this complex and lengthy process. In light of this, the 2019 local election in Northern Ireland may in time prove to be a moment in which the tide of Northern Irish politics took a decisive turn.

“...hope for a great sea-change

On the far side of revenge.”

(Seamus Heaney, 1990)

## Resources

Alliance Party 2019 'Demand Better: Alliance Party Local Government Manifesto 2019' *CAIN*

[https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/apni/apni\\_2019-04-17\\_lg-man.pdf](https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/apni/apni_2019-04-17_lg-man.pdf)

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**Table 1:** Total Candidates in Local Elections by Political Party and Change on 2014

	DUP	SF	UUP	SDLP	AP	GRN	TUV	UKIP	Aontú	PUP	IND	PBPA	WRKS	CON	Other	Total
2014	189	142	116	116	81	14	49	22	N/A	25	59	2	6	13	64	893
2019	172	156	116	85	83	26	32	18	16	10	71	12	7	8	7	819
change	-17	+14	0	-31	2	12	-17	-4	16	-15	12	10	1	-5	-57	-74
%change	-9%	10%	0%	-27%	2%	86%	-35%	-18%	–	-60%	20%	500%	17%	-38%	-89%	-8%

Source: Figures adapted from Kelly, 09.04.2019 *Sluggar O'Toole* (<https://sluggerotoole.com/2019/04/09/122416/>)

**Table 2:** Local Election Results by Seats Won and +/- change on seats held since 2014

PARTY	SEATS	+/- (2014)
DUP	122	-8
Sinn Féin	105	0
UUP	75	-13
SDLP	59	-7
Alliance	53	+21
Independent	24	+9
Green	8	+4
TUV	6	-7
PBPA	5	+4
PUP	3	-1
Aontú	1	+1
CCLA	1	+1
UKIP	0	-3
NI21	0	-1
Eligible Electorate	1,305,553	687,733

Source: Compiled from EONI (<http://www.eoni.org.uk/Elections/Election-results-and-statistics/Election-results-and-statistics-2003-onwards/Elections-2019/Local-Council-Election-Results>)

**Table 3: Unionist Nationalist Other, Political Parties in Local Elections**

	<b>1997</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2019</b>
Unionist <sup>11</sup>	49.48	47.5	49.4	45	45.9	41.2
Nationalist <sup>12</sup>	39.06	40.2	40.1	40.6	38.4	35.2
Other <sup>13</sup>	13.43	13.0	10.9	14.3	16.8	21.6
Turnout	54.7	66.02	61.55	55.72	51.33	52.6

Source: Compiled from data available on Northern Ireland Elections held at ARK (<https://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/>) 2019

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<sup>11</sup> **Unionist:** DUP, UUP, UKIP, PUP, TUV, NI Conservatives, NI21

<sup>12</sup> **Nationalist:** Sinn Féin, SDLP, SEA

<sup>13</sup> **Other:** Green Party, Alliance, NLP

## Appendix One

**Table 4:** Distribution of seats on Northern Ireland 11 councils, 2019 local elections

<b>Council</b>	<b>DUP</b>	<b>SF</b>	<b>UUP</b>	<b>SDLP</b>	<b>AP</b>	<b>GRN</b>	<b>TUV</b>	<b>AON</b>	<b>PUP</b>	<b>IND</b>	<b>PBPA</b>	<b>CCLA</b>
<i>Antrim and Newtownabbey</i>	14	5	9	4	7	0	0	0	0	1	0	
<i>Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon</i>	11	10	10	6	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	
<i>Belfast City</i>	15	18	2	6	10	4	0	0	2	0	3	
<i>Causeway Coast and Glens</i>	14	9	7	6	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	
<i>Derry and Strabane</i>	7	11	2	11	2	0	0	1	0	4	2	
<i>Fermanagh and Omagh</i>	5	15	9	5	1	0	0	0	0	4	0	1
<i>Lisburn and Castlereagh</i>	15	2	11	2	9	1	0	0	0	0	0	
<i>Mid and East Antrim</i>	15	2	7	1	7	0	5	0	0	3	0	
<i>Mid-Ulster</i>	9	17	6	6	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	
<i>Newry, Mourne and Down</i>	3	16	4	11	2	0	0	0	0	5	0	
<i>North Down and Ards</i>	14	0	8	1	10	3	1	0	0	3	0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>

**Source:** Electoral Office for Northern Ireland, *EONI* 2019.

(<http://www.eoni.org.uk/Elections/Election-results-and-statistics/Election-results-and-statistics-2003-onwards/Elections-2019/Local-Council-Election-Results>)