Table 1. Party Support in Elections in Northern Ireland, 1968-89

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNIONIST</th>
<th>NATIONALIST</th>
<th>NON-CONFESSIONAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BLOC</td>
<td>BLOC</td>
<td>BLOC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election</td>
<td>UUP</td>
<td>DUP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>8.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>25.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key and Notes:
- Type of election is indicated by lower case: S = Stormont Parliament; W = Westminster Parliament
- LQ = Local Government District; A = Assembly; CA = Constitutional Assembly
- E = European Parliament

If in Northern Ireland politics change seems to be at a snail’s pace, then the best way to see it is to take a bird’s eye view. In the first of a two-part series, BRENDAN O’LEARY stands back from 20 years of voting in the province—and maps out some dramatic shifts.

BEREADISM is THE journalistic idiom that changes in politics, philosophy, comedy and culture are easily divi-
dible into units of ten. However, the last two decades of voting in Northern Ireland have seen dramatic changes in support for political parties—throwing into question the current impression that instability is permanently built into Northern Ireland politics.

Table 1 breaks down the support for the parties into the Unionist bloc, the Nationalist bloc, Non-confes-
sionals and Others. It shows how support for them, expressed as a percentage of the total vote (the first-preference vote) has changed in the 18 province-wide elections between 1969 and 1989. (The January 1988 by-elections caused by the resignations of 15 unionist MPs in protest . . . or Anglo-Irish Agreement are excluded . . . cause they did not produce a province-wide poll.)

The Unionist bloc is characterised by its overwhelming commitment to the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and is, in essence, Protestant support. It therefore includes the Ulster Unionist party, the Conservative party, the Alliance party, the Democratic Unionist party and the Democratic Unionist party (SDLP). The Nationalist bloc is the main opposition bloc to the Unionist bloc and includes the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Ulster Democratic party, the Social Democratic and Labour party (SDLP), the Social Democratic and Labour party (UUP), the Social Democratic and Labour party ( Sinn Féin) and the Social Democratic and Labour party (NLP). The Alliance party (APN), founded by former members of the UUP, became an explicitly bi-confessional party, drawing Catholic as well as Protestant support, and is therefore not classified here as part of the Unionist bloc—even though it is a small Unionist party. Other unionist organisations which have emerged but faded include the militantly loyalist Ulster Unionist Progressive party of Bill Craig, the Unionist party of Northern Ireland—which favoured power-sharing—and the Ulster Loyalist Democratic party (now Ulster Democratic party) which acts as a front for the UDA.

The DUP grew fairly consistently at the ex-
pense of the UUP until 1981. And its leader, Rev Ian Paisley, has enjoyed a huge firstpreference vote in every European election since 1979. But the UUP made a comeback in the early 1980s and in the wake of the failure of DUP minority to break the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

The Nationalist bloc is characterised by a commitment, of some sort, to the political unification of the island of Ireland and by its commitment to a two-state solution, with a united Ireland in the north.

Figure 1. Actual and Smoothed Share of the Nationalist Bloc 1968-89

- Actual Nationalist Vote
- Smoothed Nationalist Vote

12 February Fortnight
essentially Catholic appeal. Its internal differ-
ences are over how to achieve territorial unifi-
cation and the nature of a post-unification Ire-
land. The SDLP, the largest party in the bloc, is
constitutionally nationalist and committed to
seeking unification by consent. It is a member of
the Socialist International. Its Catholic sup-
port is concentrated amongst the better-off,
those who live west of the Liffey and the over-
60s. It rapidly consolidated its position as the
principal nationalist party after contesting its
first province-wide elections in 1973. Its for-
tunes declined slightly in the early 1980s but it
has re-established its position since the Anglo-
Irish Agreement.

Sinn Féin, the second largest party in the
bloc, supports the insurrectionary activities of
the IRA and has been contesting province-wide
elections since 1982. Its rapid growth since
then appears to have been halted by the agree-
ment. Other nationalist parties have emerged
but faded in the last two decades include the
Republican Clubs—which is counted as part of
the nationalist bloc until 1979 in my classifica-
tion—and the Irish Independence party.

The Non-confessional bloc is characterised
by the nominally non-ethnic and non-religious
appeal of its parties. The Northern Ireland
Labour party (NILP) and the Alliance party,
sought bi-confessional support. The Workers’
party (WP), especially since its emergence
from the Republican Clubs in the early 1980s,
hass explicitly sought support as a non-sectarian
socialist party. Just like the NILP used to be, Alli-
ance and the WP are tactically unionist, but
not Outsider. They make no apologies for, and
do not wish to return to, anything like the Stor-
mont regime. They even have ‘Irish dis-

cussion’. Alliance accepts the agreement, and
the Workers’ party is organised throughout Ire-
land.

The Other category includes independents,
ecologists and groups not easily classifiable
into the other three blocs. Recently it has come
to include the representatives of groups seek-
ing to organise ‘British’ (ie Conservatve, Labour,
Liberal and SDP) political parties in Northern
Ireland on a nominally non-
confessional basis.

Clear long-term trends emerge. First, since
1959 there has been sustained, long-run growth
in support for the nationalist bloc. Second,
there has been intense and volatile competition
between the UUP and the DUP for hegemony
within a declining Unionist bloc. Finally, the
Non-confessional bloc has reconstituted and
fragmented at regular intervals. Although it has
waxed at it now mostly waning.

In Figure 1 the smoothed interpolation of
support for the nationalist bloc indicates a

otherwise have voted for the APNI. But the na-
tionalist vote in the 1989 European elections
seems part of the rising trend rather than a
deviant result (although this may be an artefactual of being the last point on the graph). The most
notable performance below trend in the Na-
tionalist bloc occurred in the 1981 local gov-
ernment elections—symptomatic of the con-
siderable Catholic electoral alienation at the
time of the hunger strikers.

Why has the nationalist vote risen so con-
sistently? There are four distinct but not
incomparable explanations. First, demographic explanations suggest that because the Catholic
population has been growing the nationalist
vote has risen in tandem. But the nationalist
share of the vote has increased from just below
a fifth to just over a third in 20 years, whereas
at most the Catholic population (as opposed to
the electorate) has risen from just over a third to
just under two-fifths of the total. So, even if the
demographic surge has boosted nationalist
voting, Catholics have become much more
likely to vote nationalist.

Second, psychographic explanations sug-
gest that the change in the voting system to
STV increased Catholic participation. But the
nationalist vote has also increased in first-past-
the-post Westminster elections.

Third, institutional explanations point to
the legalisation of Sinn Féin, increases in the
number of Westminster seats after 1979, and
recent reforms giving Irish citizens the right to
vote in Northern Ireland in the same way as
British citizens. The first of these is clearly the
most important—if Sinn Féin were still illegal,
nationalist abstentions would be higher. The
second change may help explain the rise in
nationalist voting at Westminster elections since
1979. The greater the scare the greater proba-
bility that one’s vote will make a difference, but
this can only have been a minor factor in
increasing Nationalist voting. The third and
most recent change, in the sense of ’1 votes’,
only applies to local government elections and
cannot be responsible for long-run trends.

Finally, political explanations point to in-
creased nationalist voting as symptomatic of

Figure 3. Voting for Unionist bloc. 1969-1989.

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the polarization of Northern Ireland. Increased nationalist voting in the 1980s is the joint product of two key developments: Sinn Fein’s mobilization of previously abstaining voters and the failure of British returns to win the “hearts and minds” of the Catholic population. Figure 2, which shows the distribution of the nationalist vote over time, shows how Sinn Fein’s decision to participate in Northern Ireland elections boosted the total nationalist vote. Those who would place more on political explanations can also point to the collapse of the NIL, the fall-off in support for the APNI, and the failure of the WP as examples of the same phenomenon—the failure of bi-confessional, reformist parties to entrench themselves in the Catholic population in a qualified and reformed milieu in which such parties’ appeal is relevant.

Whatever the explanations, however, nationalist voting seems destined to grow, especially if current demographic trends continue—although that is by no means certain. While not everybody who votes nationalist (for the SDLP or indeed Sinn Fein) is unequivocally committed to a pan-Irish solution in the Northern Ireland conflict, the Catholic population has become both absolutely and relatively more nationalist in its voting behavior since 1969.

The share of the Unionist bloc, by contrast, has declined, though marginally. In the elections between 1969 and 1979 the mean vote of the Unionist bloc was 49.8 per cent, and the median (median of means) 50.3 per cent, whereas in the election between 1981 and 1989 its mean vote was 55.6 per cent, its median 56.95 per cent. However, the end-point on the graph—47.4 per cent in 1969 and 51.4 per cent in the 1987 Euro-elections—illuminates the decline more starkly (if one fails to misread it). The departure of Protestant (and some Catholic) unionists to vote for the pro-power-sharing APNI permanently reduced the Unionist bloc from the mid-1970s. However, even though Alliance did well in the 1980s, the Unionist bloc is now hovering just above half of the voting electorate.

The overt main factor explaining the unionist share of the vote has of course been the increase of nationalist share. This is now obviously, if the organization of the Conservatives in some Northern Ireland constituencies produces a significant electoral impact, the Unionist bloc’s support will fall below 50 per cent early in this decade.

The volatile distribution of the vote within the Unionist bloc itself has been more marked than the gradual decline of its overall share. As Figure 4 shows, the fragmentation between 1970 and 1979 rapidly gave way to two-party competition between the UUP and the DUP. Overtime these two parties have absorbed the entire bloc’s vote.

Five features of UUP/DUP competition are apparent. First, in the European elections Mr. Paisley’s performance foreshadowed his support in the UK and the DUP’s in the UK. Second, in Westminster elections the UUP outpolls the DUP consistently. The latter elections being under the first past the post system, an atomized UUP vote may benefit from the fact that a vote for the DUP candidate would be in a unionist challenger. The logic of this has baffled Mr. Paisley, often against the wishes of his colleagues, to permit the UUP a free run in certain constituencies. Third, the competition between the UUP and the DUP is fiercely contested in local government and assembly elections, where STV permits free competition and the relevance of Mr. Paisley’s charisma is less potent. Fourth, the second and third features suggest deepening influence for the DUP leadership is consistently more successful than the UUP’s, and why the DUP, when reconstituted at Westminster, is now consistently in favour of integration.

Finally, as Figure 5 suggests, all the elections held after the Anglo-Irish Agreement—1973 Westminster, the 1979 local government, and the 1989 European elections—suggest a decline in support for the DUP as compared with the previous directly contestable elections. In 1983, however, there was competition between the UUP and the DUP for Westminster seats, whereas in 1973 Mr Paisley made a pact with the UUP if the expense of his own party—i.e., it is unlikely—to be repeated.

The long-term trend in the Unionist bloc is very slowly downwards, but it will not be the next century before this trend could produce a Nationalist bloc majority. However, the Unionist bloc will almost certainly lack a simple majority of votes in the 1980s, especially if the Conservative party organizes throughout the province.

This could, unmounted, marginally enhance the prospects for power-sharing conditions in a future Assembly. But if no polls did suggest—support for the Conservatives is overwhelming in the current Westminster Parliament, the opposite effect may occur. Competition between the UUP and the Conservative Party may well be an essential factor if the DUP can reject both "devolution and 'power-sharing" as 'foreign' and 'un-British' ideas. Such competition would block the prospects for agreed devolution since the SDLP-DUP-APNI coalition government still seems an idea for fantasists.

The parties which have not been organized explicitly in terms of the 'national question' and which have sought or non-confrontational support. Such political involvement over time since 1999, even though Alliance did experience a surge in the mid- and late 1970s, Figure 6 illustrates the fortunes of the NIL, the APNI, and the DUP is fiercely contested in local government and assembly elections, where STV permits free competition and the relevance of Mr. Paisley’s charisma is less potent. Fourth, the second and third features suggest deepening influence for the DUP leadership is consistently more successful than the UUP’s, and why the DUP, when reconstituted at Westminster, is now consistently in favour of integration.

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the WP and the residual "Other" category. It demonstrates that peaks of support for this bloc have receded over time, suggesting a steady decline overall. The NIP, the biggest single party opposing the UUP in the Scottish elections of 1969, was squeezed rapidly in the polarisation that accompanied the onset of "the troubles". The Alliance's initial growth sustained, while the WP has failed to make its serious inroad into the working-class electorate.

Figure 6 also shows four troughs of support for the Non-confessional bloc. The first was in the deeply polarised conditions of the February 1974 Westminster election, when many Alliance voters backed Brian Faulkner's pro-Sunningdale unionists to keep alive the prospect of power-sharing. The other troughs have occurred in European elections. There are two plausible explanations for this apparently anomalous result. First, the European context polarises the electorate, whatever the prevailing political climate, because there are only three seats at stake and two candidates are likely to achieve a quota on the first count. Therefore a first-preference vote for any candidate from the Non-confessional bloc appears a wasted vote.

Second, some "natural" Alliance voters probably desert that party in European elections to vote for John Hume of the SDLP (if they are Catholic) or the UUP candidate (if they are Protestant). They desert to strengthen the "moderates" against the "extremists" (the SDLP against SF, or the UUP against the DUP), if also in Mr Hume's case because he campaigns on a genuinely European manifesto. The Euro-
elections thus show that voting behaviour in Northern Ireland is rationalised both by the voting system and the organisation of constituency boundaries. It is not simply a Puritanic reflection of the balance of sectarian forces.

One interesting question arises about the "Other" bloc. How should one classify the group of people who support British political parties and their supporters? Are they Unionist bloc aspirant-unionists in new clothes or genuinely non-confessional? The enthusiastic activities for this strategy seem the main to be non-sectarian. But the same cannot be said of their potential supporters. If support for the new Conservative party organisation remains overwhelmingly concentrated amongst Protestants —a fact from poll data which cannot simply be explained by the disproportionate number of Protestants among the better off—then their "non-sectarian" status will remain a moot point.

* Concluded next month

**Figure 6. Non-Confessional Bloc and Other Bloc, 1969-1969.**

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<th>Party performances before and after the Anglo-Irish Agreement: share of the vote of Unionist and Nationalist blocs (%)</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>DUP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sinn Féin</td>
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Notes: The vote share figures are rounded out the 'net change' figures are to one decimal place. The figures for local government and European elections are percentages of all first preference votes; for Westminster of the total vote.

**Beyond the blocs**

In *Fortnight* 281, BRENDAN O’LEYAR surveyed voting patterns in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years. Here he takes a closer look at the impact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement on electoral behaviour.

The impact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement on support for political parties in Northern Ireland is of critical importance. The makers of the agreement intended to shake up the trend — they hoped it would reverse the growth of Sinn Fein and stabilise support for the constitutional nationalists in the SSDLP, and that the unpalatable choices the agreement presented to unionists would encourage divisions conducive to power-sharing. The biggest shifts have occurred within the Unionist bloc. The DUP has certainly lost ground since the Hillsborough accord; its share of the combined DUP and UUP vote fell in the Westminster elections of 1987 and the local government elections of 1988. In all three elections held after the signing of the agreement, including last year’s European elections, Mr Paisley’s party failed to match its share in the corresponding elections before the agreement. The DUP’s machinery failed in bringing any dividends, and its pact with the UUP in the Westminster elections of 1987 guaranteed that its showing would be worse.

The share of the vote attributable to the Unionist bloc as a whole also fell below that of each of the last comparable elections — 55 per cent in the Westminster election of June 1987, to 49 per cent in the council elections of May 1989 and to 51 per cent in the European elections. Indeed, the 1989 elections produced the lowest and second lowest shares for the Unionist bloc since 1969 — and probably since elections in the province began. Some unionists undoubtedly abstained — some disillusioned with constitutional politics on both sides. Others may have been put off by the Unionists’ more recent electoral success. Sinn Fein, after all, offers a popular alternative to a unionist government.

Victim of decline — Enoch Powell and his wife, Pamela, in their living room in South Down, after the removal men had called

16 March *Fortnight*