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BRITAIN VOTES 1997

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Northern Ireland: La Fin de Siècle, The Twilight of the Second Protestant Ascendancy and Sinn Féin's Second Coming

BY BRENDAN O'LEARY* AND GEOFFREY EVANS†

LET US begin with a confident but falsifiable prediction. The 1997 Westminster election is likely to be the last of such elections in which the Unionist (with a capital 'U') bloc wins an overall majority of the votes cast in Northern Ireland—even if there is no reform of the electoral system for the United Kingdom parliament. Our prediction is based on the results displayed in Table 1. They show that in three region-wide elections held in Northern Ireland within one year (May 1996–97) the average share of the vote of the Unionist bloc—the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKU), the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) and the Conservative and Unionist Party (Con)—was 50.3%. The Unionist (U) bloc has been distinguished by its unionism, its ethnic Protestantism, and its reluctance to share significant political power with nationalists, which is why supporters of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI) should not be defined as part of the U bloc. The APNI supports the Union, but draws albeit small-scale electoral support (averaging 7%) from both Protestants and Catholics. It also promotes power-sharing between nationalists and unionists, favours cooperative relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and therefore presents itself as a bridge-builder. Provided one condition is met, Table 1 suggests that the APNI will have a social base for its self-professed role at the beginning of the next century because it will hold a pivotal electoral share of votes. The condition is that the proportion of the Northern Irish electorate which belongs to cultural Catholic families continues to rise—a condition that will be met.¹

Our prediction does not imply an immediate and complete reversal of fortunes for unionism (with a lower case 'u'). The U bloc's loss of an overall majority of the future electorate will not mean that the Nationalist (N) bloc will enjoy exactly what the U bloc loses. That is because although the N bloc is growing, as visibly demonstrated in Figure 1, it cannot, *ceteris paribus*, become a majority bloc for another two decades; and it is that fact that will give the APNI its bridge-building opportunity.

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1. Bloc performances in Northern Irish elections 1996–97. Parties' share of the vote (in %)

Party	Westminster '97		Local government '97		Forum '96	
	UUP	32.7	Local government	27.8	Forum	'96
DUP	13.6	15.6	18.8	24.2		
UKU	1.6	1.6	3.7	3.7		
PUP	1.4	2.3	3.5	3.5		
UDP	—	1.2	2.2	2.2		
Con	1.2	*	.5	.5		
Total U bloc	50.3	47.5	52.9	52.9		
Average: 50.3						
SDLP	24.1	20.7	21.4	21.4		
SF	16.1	16.9	15.5	15.5		
Total N bloc	40.2	37.6	36.9	36.9		
Average: 38.2						
APNI	8	6.5	6.6	6.6		
Average 7						
Total: U + N + APNI	98.7	91.6	96.4	96.4		
Other	1.3	**8.4	3.6	3.6		

Notes: (i) Key to Parties: UKU = United Kingdom Unionist Party; Con = Conservative and Unionist Party; DUP = Democratic Unionist Party; PUP = Progressive Unionist Party; UUP = Ulster Unionist Party; SDLP = Social Democratic and Labour Party; SF = Sinn Féin; Others = Workers' Party, Natural Law Party, NI Women's Coalition, Independents etc. (ii) * Figure for Conservatives is not yet available, but is less than .5. (iii) ** The high proportion of Others in local government masks the presence of some successful independent nationalist and unionist candidates.

Table 1 shows that in the three region-wide elections held in Northern Ireland within the last year the average share of the vote of the N bloc—the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin (SF)—was 38.2%; and that in the 1997 Westminster elections it was, for the first time, above 40%. We see no reason to believe that this growth will be arrested—differential abstentionism and alienation amongst unionist voters are not the major causes of the growth of the N bloc.

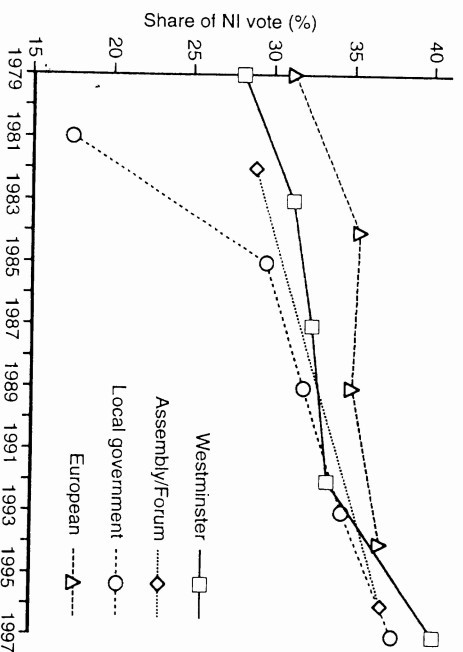


Figure 1. Nationalist share of the NI vote in Westminster, assembly, forum, local government and European elections, 1979–97

Beneath the headline news of electoral victories for the leading lights in Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams in West Belfast and Martin McGuinness in Mid-Ulster, a slow but seismic shift is taking place in the balance of electoral power in Northern Ireland. The proportion of cultural Catholics in Northern Ireland was at least 42% in the 1991 census,² and since then it has continued to expand. This demographic shift, in a population in which bloc and party identification are much stronger than in Great Britain and Ireland, is now making itself felt, and is especially evident amongst younger cohorts of voters. The fact is commented on by observers watching the expansion of the electoral register in nationalist districts. All nationalists are the beneficiaries of this changing demography; although Sinn Féin, so far, is benefiting more than the SDLP. In a survey we conducted in May 1996 almost 60% of Sinn Féin's support came from the 18–34 age cohort, three times the level of support the party enjoyed amongst respondents aged 55 or over,³ a pattern consistent with evidence from the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey data in the early and mid 1990s.⁴ Moreover, in the last year Sinn Féin has experienced a second coming, averaging 16.5% of the vote in three elections, compared with its 1982–94 average of 11.3%. The party first erupted into electoral politics in 1982, but soon seemed trapped in a ten per cent electoral ghetto, especially after the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 had appeared to stanch its growth-prospects.⁵ Its recent and second wave of growth therefore has two primary sources: one is the demographic factor just discussed; the second is political. Sinn Féin has gained from its identification with what is optimistically called the first peace process, and it has won votes that might otherwise have gone to the SDLP, a fact which SDLP canvassers conveyed with dismay to one of the authors⁶ and which was predicted some time ago by the other on the basis of analyses of the bases of competition among the nationalist parties in the early 1990s.⁷

The Westminster elections of 1 May 1997 were largely and understandably reported as the tale of Sinn Féin's second coming, but the broad changes the election signified were first highlighted in the elections to the Northern Ireland Peace Forum in May 1996.⁸ The latter, conducted in the same newly drawn 18 constituencies as those used for the Westminster elections, revealed a significant fragmentation in the unionist vote as well as a significant leap in support for Sinn Féin. Despite the complaints of David Trimble, the leader of the UUP, the fragmentation or 'shredding'⁹ of the U bloc is only partly explained by the mechanics of the Droop electoral system—a party list-system using a combination of the Droop formula and the d'Hondt divisor (but equivalent to pure d'Hondt).⁹ 'Other Unionists', by comparison with the mid-1980s, are now attracting an increasing share of the vote in the region, even though none of these fragments can as yet hope to displace the UUP or the DUP as the major unionist parties. In the Westminster elections there was less fragmentation of the unionist vote than in the

Forum election, and that, of course, is partly explained by the well-known mechanical effects of plurality rule (see Tables 1 and 2), but the local government elections held three weeks after the Westminster election, under the single transferable vote, suggest that there are political as well as mechanical reasons for the fragmentation of the U bloc.

2. Party performances in the Westminster election in Northern Ireland. Parties' share of the vote (in %)

Party	UKU	Con	DUP	PUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF	WP	NL	Oth
Seats	1	—	2	—	10	—	3	2	—	—	—
Seats %	5.6	—	11.1	—	55.6	—	16.7	11.1	—	—	—
Votes %	1.6	1.2	13.6	1.4	32.7	—	24.1	16.1	.3	.3	.7

Notes: (i) Deviation from proportionality: $D = (1/2) \sum |S_i - V_i| = 26.2$. (ii) Key to Parties: As in Table 1, except that WP = Workers Party; NL = Natural Law Party; Oth = Others, Independents and Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.

There are two key political reasons for this. First, the uncertainty amongst unionists about the best political strategy to pursue in the face of the British and Irish inter-governmentalism established by the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, re-expressed in the Joint Declaration for Peace in 1993, and given detailed institutional form in the joint framework documents of February 1995.¹⁰ And second, the electoral emergence of two small loyalist parties, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), as the political fronts of the loyalist paramilitaries in the wake of their official cease fires in October 1994. The first reason explains the rise and fall in support for the Conservatives between 1989 and 1994 (from 0% to 5% and back to just about 0%), and the vicissitudes of the political career of Robert McCartney MP who originally proffered his United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKU) as an alternative to conventional unionism, especially as articulated by Ian Paisley's DUP, but who now wins his seat in North Down with the support of Paisley's party. The second reason explains why urban working class Protestant voters are leaving the UUP and the DUP, albeit so far in small numbers. These uncertainties amongst unionists must not all be read in an entirely negative light—suggesting that moderate unionists in the UUP are faced by multiple forms of extremist 'outflanking'. The internal possibilities and complexities of the divisions and uncertainties amongst unionists need to be emphasised, e.g. it is not widely appreciated in Great Britain that the leaders of the PUP are far more constitutionally flexible than for example the leadership of the DUP.

It may seem odd to maintain that there is a political crisis amongst unionists when the UUP alone took 10 of the 18 Westminster seats, and when the U bloc as a whole took 13 (see Table 2). But the U bloc's success in seats is superficial, as we shall argue below. The success is, of course, in part the outcome of the absurdities of plurality rule (see Dunleavy and Margetts in this volume): deviation from proportionality was a staggering 26.2; and with merely 32.7% of the vote the UUP won

3. 'Safe' unionist seats. Order of placement of parties and per cent share of vote (%)

Seat	1	2	3	4	5
Antrim E	UUP (38.8)	APNI (20.2)	DUP (19.5)	Con (6.8)	PUP (5.1)
Antrim N	DUP (46.5)	UUP (23.7)	SDLP (15.9)	SF (6.3)	APNI (6.2)
Antrim S	UUP (57.5)	SDLP (16.2)	APNI (11.6)	PUP (8.7)	SF (5.6)
Bann U	UUP (43.6)	SDLP (24.2)	SF (12.1)	DUP (11.5)	APNI (6.3)
Belfast E	DUP (42.6)	UUP (25.3)	APNI (20.2)	Con (5.4)	SF (2.1)
Belfast N	UUP (51.8)	SDLP (20.4)	SF (14.4)	APNI (13)	GP (1.3)
Belfast S	UUP (36)	SDLP (24.3)	PUP (14.4)	APNI (13)	SF (5.1)
Derry E	DUP (35.6)	DUP (25.6)	SDLP (21.7)	SF (9.1)	APNI (6.4)
Down N	UKU (35.1)	UUP (31.1)	APNI (20.7)	Con (5)	SDLP (4.4)
Down V	UUP (55.4)	APNI (17.2)	DUP (13.6)	SDLP (7.8)	Con (2.7)
Lagan V	UUP (55.4)	APNI (17.2)	DUP (13.6)	SDLP (7.8)	Con (2.7)
Strangford	UUP (44.3)	DUP (30.2)	APNI (13.1)	SDLP (6.7)	Con (4.2)

Notes: (i) Key to Parties: As in Table 1. 'Safe' refers to seats where support for unionist parties (UUP, DUP, PUP, UKU, Con) is over 50%. (ii) The seats most vulnerable to a nationalist pact are Belfast North and Belfast South, but for nationalists to win these seats the unionist vote must be divided. (iii) In Tables 3-5 we employ the mode of presentation first used by P. Mitchell, 'Party Competition in an Ethnic Dual Party System', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 18 October 1995, p. 773.

55.6% of the seats. Northern Ireland's results should therefore be added to the arsenal of those who suggest the case for a reformed and proportional representation electoral system for Westminster. But the success of the U bloc in seats is also the outcome of greater coordination by unionist parties in competition against nationalist parties. The ethnically national imperative, uniting when necessary against the ethnic competitor, is for the moment felt more keenly by unionists than nationalists. In 'safe unionist' seats (see Table 3) and in 'safe nationalist' seats (see Table 4) the number of effective unionist candidates reflected their bloc's chances, while the two nationalist parties competed with one another in seventeen of the eighteen seats (Sinn Féin did not run a candidate in North Down, a unionist haven if not heaven). The DUP chose not to run candidates against the UUP where to do so might have facilitated a nationalist victory (notably in West Tyrone, Belfast North, and Belfast South). The UDP, the less successful of the smaller loyalist parties in the Forum elections, decided not to compete in any Westminster seats; while the PUP decided not to endanger the sitting UUP MP in Belfast North, Cecil Walker, where its intervention just might have led to a nationalist victory, or to run against the sitting DUP MP, Peter Robinson, in Belfast East, where its intervention might conceivably have

4. 'Safe' nationalist seats. Order of placement of parties and per cent share of vote (%)

Seat	1	2	3	4	5
Belfast W	SF (55.9)	SDLP (38.7)	UUP (3.4)	WP (1.6)	HR (0.2)
Down S	SDLP (52.9)	UUP (32.8)	SF (10.4)	APNI (3.5)	NLP (0.4)
Foyle	SDLP (52.5)	SF (23.9)	DUP (21.5)	APNI (1.7)	NLP (0.3)
Mid Ulster	SF (40.1)	DUP (36.3)	SDLP (22.1)	APNI (0.9)	WP (0.5)
Newry & Armagh	SDLP (43)	UUP (33.8)	SF (22.1)	APNI (1.9)	NLP (0.2)
Tyrone W	UUP (35.6)	SDLP (32.1)	SF (30.9)	APNI (1.8)	WP (0.5)

Notes: (i) Key to Parties: As in Table 1. 'Safe' refers to seats where support for nationalist parties (SDLP, SF, DUP, WP, HR, NLP) is over 50%. (ii) The seats most vulnerable to a unionist pact are Newry and Armagh, Mid Ulster and Tyrone West.

let the APNI candidate win. Unionist cooperation can be seen most clearly in Fermanagh and South Tyrone where the sitting UUP MP, Ken Maginnis, faced no rival unionist (see Table 5), and in West Tyrone where the UUP won a seat despite a combined nationalist vote of 63% (see Table 4).

5. Unionist-Nationalist marginal(s). Order of placement of parties and per cent share of vote (%)

Seat	1	2	3	4	5
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	UUP (51.5)	SF (23.1)	SDLP (22.9)	APNI (2)	NLP (0.5)

Note: 'Marginals' refers to seat where the difference between support for unionist and nationalist parties is less than 6%.

Unionist coordination and nationalist competition can be seen clearly in the contrast in the nature of party competition in safe unionist and safe nationalist seats. In the latter (Table 3) unionists unite behind the unionist candidate most likely to win; in the former they allow themselves the luxury of limited competition (Table 4). As Table 6 shows, by comparison with the Forum election the UUP enjoyed major increases in its share of the vote in the Westminster election in safe unionist (an average of 12.8%), safe nationalist (an average of 9.6%)

6. Comparing party performances in 1997 Westminster and 1996 Forum elections. (% Westminster - % Forum)

Seat	Con	UKU	UDP	PUP	DUP	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SF
Antrim E	6	*	*	-1.7	-9.2	8.7	8.3	-2.1	-3
Antrim N	*	*	*	*	9.5	-1.6	.5	-3	.5
Antrim S	*	*	*	4.4	*	27.3	3.2	1.1	.1
Bann U	*	*	*	*	-4.1	2.7	1.6	2.7	-2
Belfast E	1.7	*	*	*	13.2	2.8	5.2	-1.8	-2
Belfast N	*	*	*	*	34.6	3.6	1.3	1.9	1.2
Belfast S	1.7	*	*	8.3	*	13.2	.5	5.8	-1.4
Derry E	*	*	*	*	1.8	4.7	.7	1.4	-2
Down N	3.8	14.3	*	*	5.5	5.5	3.6	-1	*
Down V	*	*	*	*	-8.5	17.7	6.8	-1.4	*
Lagan V	*	*	*	*	1.3	13	1.6	-1.4	-1
Strangford	1.5	*	*	*	1.3	13	1.6	-1.4	-1
Average increase in 'safe' unionist seats	2.9	14.3	*	3.6	.6	12.8	3	.6	0
Belfast W	*	*	*	*	*	-2	*	12.2	2.5
Down S	*	*	*	*	*	10.6	*	9.6	-2.7
Foyle	*	*	*	*	*	10.3	*	-1	8.3
Mid Ulster	*	*	*	*	*	19.8	*	-4	-1.8
Newry & Armagh	*	*	*	*	*	11.3	*	-2	10.4
Tyrone West	*	*	*	*	*	16.7	*	-8	-4.5
Average increase in 'safe' nationalist seats	2.9	14.3	*	3.6	.6	12.8	3	.6	0
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	15.1	9.6	-3	6.1	1.1
Increase in marginal	*	*	*	*	*	19.2	.3	1.3	-1.1
Increase in marginal	*	*	*	*	*	19.2	.3	1.3	-1.1

Notes: (i) Figures in cells are share of the vote in (1997) Westminster elections minus share of the vote in (1996) Forum elections.

and safe marginal seats (up 19%). The behaviour of the local branches of the Conservative party is perhaps most revealing of Northern Ireland's dual party system. It was set up in 1989 in a wave of enthusiasm for 'electoral integration' that maintained that votes for British parties would transcend traditional divisions within the population.¹¹ But in the 1997 Westminster election the party ran no candidates in safe nationalist seats, suggesting that its integrationist ambitions count less than saving deposits.

Nationalist competition, by contrast, was fierce, but not violent, throughout Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin's Gerry Adams won back West Belfast, benefiting from redrawn electoral boundaries, and won comfortably despite evidence of tactical voting by loyalists and unionists for the SDLP's Joe Hendron and the decision of the APNI not to run a candidate. Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin won the re-structured seat of Mid-Ulster from the DUP's Reverend William McCrea, and also comfortably beat his SDLP challenger, Denis Haughey—even though the SDLP and Sinn Féin had been level-pegging in the same constituency in the Forum election of 1996. McCrea's outspoken support for a loyalist who was subsequently jailed helped unite local nationalists behind McGuinness, who as Sinn Féin's Chief Negotiator also enjoyed the benefits of a much higher media profile than Haughey. In Foyles, Newry and Armagh, and South Down the SDLP's John Hume, Seamus Mallon and Eddie McGrady, comfortably held off their Sinn Féin challengers. But in West Tyrone a dead-heat in the nationalist race between the SDLP and Sinn Féin enabled the UUP's William Thompson to win with less than a third of the total vote.

This pattern of unionists being more disciplined within their bloc and nationalists being more competitive within theirs is not, however, likely to continue into the next century. One of the repercussions of a second peace process is likely to be an agreement amongst nationalists to have electoral pacts for Westminster elections, in which case under the present arrangements nationalists would win at least six and possibly up to eight seats. A pact was promoted by Sinn Féin during late 1996 and early 1997 but it was turned down by the SDLP because of the IRA's resumption of violence in February 1996. Moreover, if the Labour Government, as seems possible, introduces proportional representation for Westminster elections then nationalists will not need to cooperate to deprive the UUP of its 'surplus' seats; and the share of seats won by nationalists will rise in proportion with their votes, with or without a second peace process. Unionism does therefore face an electoral crisis. Come what may the U bloc will soon be an electoral minority in the region, albeit the biggest one; and it is conceivable that all Northern Ireland elections will soon be by proportional representation (various permutations of PR are already used for local government districts,

in Irish history—the first was that enjoyed by the Anglo-Irish from the end of the seventeenth until the nineteenth century.

The electoral crisis of the U bloc has been less noticed than the other outcome of the Westminster election with implications for the unionists: the loss of the UUP's grip on a Conservative Government with no parliamentary majority and its replacement by a Labour Government with an overwhelming parliamentary majority. The new Government is committed by its manifesto to the agenda of the Framework Documents—which envisage the creation of a power-sharing Northern Irish assembly; elaborate North-South institutions with consultative, harmonising and executive powers; the modification and expansion of the institutions of the Anglo-Irish Agreement; and the possible establishment of identical legal protections of individual and collective rights on both sides of the border in Ireland.¹² Throughout her time as Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Dr Marjorie Mowlam MP was unwavering in her support for the Framework Documents, more disposed than the Conservatives to being flexible on facilitating Sinn Féin's entry into all-party negotiations, warmer towards the reform of the police force, the predominantly Protestant RUC, and keener to implement the North Report on the control of marches and parades—the desire of the Orange Order to assert its traditional supremacist prerogatives is the most frequent source of unarmed public disorder in the region. Dr Mowlam's appointment as Secretary of State, and the willingness of the new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to have his first heads-of-government meeting with the Irish prime minister, and to sanction meetings between Sinn Féin and civil servants even before a restoration of the IRA cease fire, spell out a simple message, albeit one already embedded in the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The message to unionists is this: Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom for as long as a majority wants, but the U bloc has no veto on the reform of Northern Ireland, or indeed on its relations with the Republic of Ireland, other than those which a Westminster Government considers it prudent to yield.

Unionists face a very difficult transition as the second millennium beckons: a Labour Government and its allies could be in power at Westminster for a decade; the dominant party in Dáil Éireann may once again be Fianna Féil; an IRA cease fire will guarantee Sinn Féin a place at negotiating tables; the Irish, British and American governments will be keen to keep Sinn Féin in such negotiations in which the agenda is based on the Framework Documents; and against this background the demographic and electoral power of unionists is slipping. Time will tell whether in the twilight of the second Protestant ascendancy sufficient reformers emerge from the ranks of unionists to carve out a political settlement with their nationalist rivals. It is not impossible, and is eminently desirable but it will have to be the subject of another

- 1 For further discussion of demography and its political implications in Northern Ireland see B. O'Leary, 'Appendix 4. Party Support in Northern Ireland, 1969-89' in J. McGarry and B. O'Leary (eds), *The Future of Northern Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 342 and B. O'Leary, 'Introduction: Reflections on a Cold Peace' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 18, 1995.
- 2 See J. McGarry and B. O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Basil Blackwell), p. 502, fn. 24.
- 3 For details see G. Evans and B. O'Leary, 'Frameworked Futures: Intransigence and Flexibility in the Northern Ireland Elections of 30 May 1996', *Irish Political Studies*, 12, 1997.
- 4 See, inter alia, M. Duffy and G. Evans, 'Class, Community Polarisation and Politics', in L. Dowds, P. Devine and R. Breen (eds), *Attitudes in Northern Ireland: the 6th Report* (Gower, 1997), p. 102; and G. Evans and M. Duffy, 'Beyond the Sectarian Divide: The Social Bases and Political Consequences of Nationalist and Unionist Party Competition in Northern Ireland', *British Journal of Political Science* 27, 1997.
- 5 See B. O'Leary and J. McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (Athlone, 1996, 2nd edn).
- 6 We know of no good administrative or logistical argument to suggest that Sinn Féin has become more proficient in 'vote-stealing', as some of its opponents declare. Electoral manipulation has been a constant feature of Northern Irish politics, within and across both blocs and most parties, but we think that the scale of Sinn Féin's recent expansion cannot be attributed to this factor.
- 7 See G. Evans and M. Duffy, 'Beyond the Sectarian Divide: The Social Bases and Political Consequences of Unionist and Nationalist Party Competition in Northern Ireland', *British Journal of Political Science* 27, 1997.
- 8 *Supra* n. 3.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 See B. O'Leary, 'Afterword: What is Framed in the Framework Documents?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 18, 1995.
- 11 A belief which has been shown to be mistaken: see M. Duffy and G. Evans, 'Building Bridges: The Political Implications of Electoral Integration for Northern Ireland', *British Journal of Political Science* 26, 1996.
- 12 See n. 3.

The Local Elections

BY COLIN RALLINGS* AND MICHAEL THRASHER†

EIGHTEEN YEARS of Conservative government ended as it had begun—on the first Thursday in May, local election day. Only twice in history have the general and local elections been held simultaneously. On the first occasion in 1979 the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, had little choice over the election date. His party's pact with the Liberals had crumbled, leaving a minority government vulnerable to an opposition vote of no confidence. The Conservatives under Mrs Thatcher swept to power, winning not only a Commons majority but also political control of many local authorities across Britain. Now, with a pleasing symmetry the wheel has turned full circle. John Major decided that local election day 1997 offered the Conservatives their best chance of securing a fifth successive term, but instead it proved to be their electoral nemesis. Inevitably, in both 1979 and 1997 the local election campaign was overshadowed by the general election. Yet these 'forgotten elections' provide unique opportunities to further our understanding of electoral behaviour and the development of party competition in Britain.

In this article we shall examine a number of different aspects of the 1997 local elections. First, we review the results and, crucially, frame our discussion within the context of what has been a decade long Conservative decline in local government. The party now begins a period in opposition in far worse shape in local government than ever before. Second, we will use the fact of simultaneous elections to look for evidence of differential voting. Did some parties perform better in one form of election than another? Was there a consistent pattern of voting or were there local variations? Did voters turn out to vote in equal numbers for both types of election? Although only parts of Britain had local elections the contests were sufficiently widespread to allow such comparisons. Finally, we shall identify the main changes in the pattern of voter behaviour between 1979 and 1997, and assess what they might tell us about political attitudes and party loyalties.

The local election results in 1997

Ordinarily the seats up for re-election in 1997 would have been in the shire counties, last fought in 1993. But the electoral cycle has been

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