

Table 1. Party Support in Elections in Northern Ireland, 1969-89

Election	UNIONIST BLOC			NATIONALIST BLOC			NON-CONFESSIONAL BLOC			Other
	UUP	DUP	OthU	SDLP	SF	OthN	NILP	APNI	WP	
1969 S	61.1	-	6.3	-	-	18.8	8.1	0	-	5.7
1970 W	54.3	-	4.5	-	-	23.3	12.6	0	-	5.1
1973 LG	41.4	4.3	10.9	13.4	-	5.8	2.5	13.7	-	8.0
1973 A	29.3	10.8	21.8	22.1	-	2.0	2.6	9.2	-	1.0
1974W	32.3	8.2	23.7	22.4	-	4.5	2.4	3.2	-	3.3
1974W	36.5	8.5	17.1	22.0	-	7.8	1.6	6.3	-	0.2
1975 CA	25.8	14.8	21.9	23.7	-	2.2	1.4	9.8	-	0.4
1977LG	29.6	12.7	8.5	20.6	-	4.1	0.8	14.4	-	8.3
1979W	36.6	10.2	12.2	19.9	-	8.2	-	11.8	-	2.1
1979E	21.9	29.8	7.3	24.6	-	6.7	-	6.8	-	2.9
1981LG	26.5	26.6	4.2	17.5	-	5.3	-	8.9	1.8	8.2
1982A	29.7	23.0	6.7	18.8	10.1	-	-	9.3	2.7	0.7
1983W	34.0	20.0	3.0	17.9	13.4	-	-	8.0	1.9	1.6
1984E	21.5	33.6	2.9	22.1	13.3	-	-	5.0	1.3	0.3
1985LG	29.5	24.3	3.1	17.8	11.8	2.4	-	7.1	1.6	1.8
1987W	37.8	11.7	5.4	21.1	11.4	-	-	10.0	2.6	0
1989LG	31.4	17.8	-	21.2	11.3	-	-	6.8	2.1	9.4
1989E	21.5	29.9	-	25.5	9.2	-	-	5.2	1.1	5.7

**Key and Notes:**

- Type of election is indicated by letter: S= Stormont Parliament; W=Westminster Parliament
- LG = Local Government Districts; A = Assembly; CA = Constitutional Assembly and
- E = European Parliament.
- Source of Data: W.D. Flackes and S. Elliott: *Northern Ireland: A Political Directory*, Blackstaff, and the *Irish Times*.

**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.**

# More green, fewer orange

**'ECADISM'** IS THE journalistic fad that changes in politics, philosophy, comedy and culture are easily divisible 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 immobility is permanently built into Northern Ireland politics.

Table 1 breaks down the parties into the Unionist bloc, the Nationalist bloc, Non-confessional and Others. It shows how support for them, expressed as a percentage of the total vote (or the first-preference vote) has changed in the 18 province-wide elections between 1969 and 1989. (The January 1986 by-elections caused by the resignations of 15 unionist MPs in protest at the Anglo-Irish Agreement are excluded because they did not produce a province-wide poll).

The *Unionist bloc* is characterised by its overriding commitment to the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and its essentially Protestant appeal. The Ulster Unionist party, which won every election in the province between 1920 and 1969, fragmented during the collapse of the Stormont régime. The divisions within unionism—between reformers and reactionaries—were exacerbated by the introduction of the single transferable vote in 1973 for local government and assembly elections, and in 1979 for European elections.

But the Unionist bloc has realigned into two principal organisations, the UUP and the DUP. The Alliance party (APNI), founded by former members of the UUP, became an explicitly bi-confessional party, drawing Catholic as well as

Protestant support, and therefore is not classified here as part of the Unionist bloc—even though it is a small-u unionist party. Other unionist organizations which have emerged but faded include the militantly loyalist Vanguard 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 UUP and the DUP differ between themselves, and internally, over the forms and merits

of integration, devolution and power-sharing. The DUP grew fairly consistently at the expense of the UUP until 1981. And its leader, Rev Ian Paisley, has enjoyed a huge first-preference 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 militancy 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

Figure 1. Actual and Smoothed Share of the Nationalist Bloc 1969-89

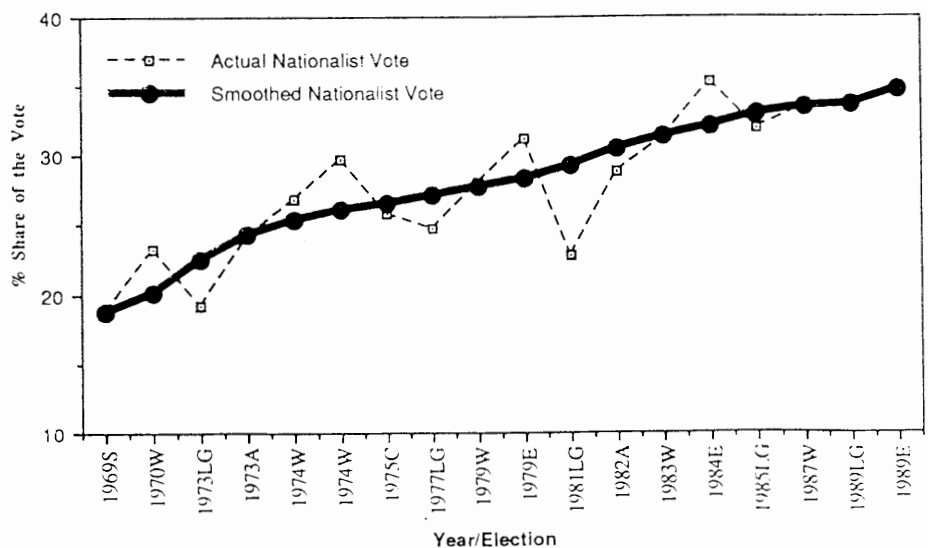
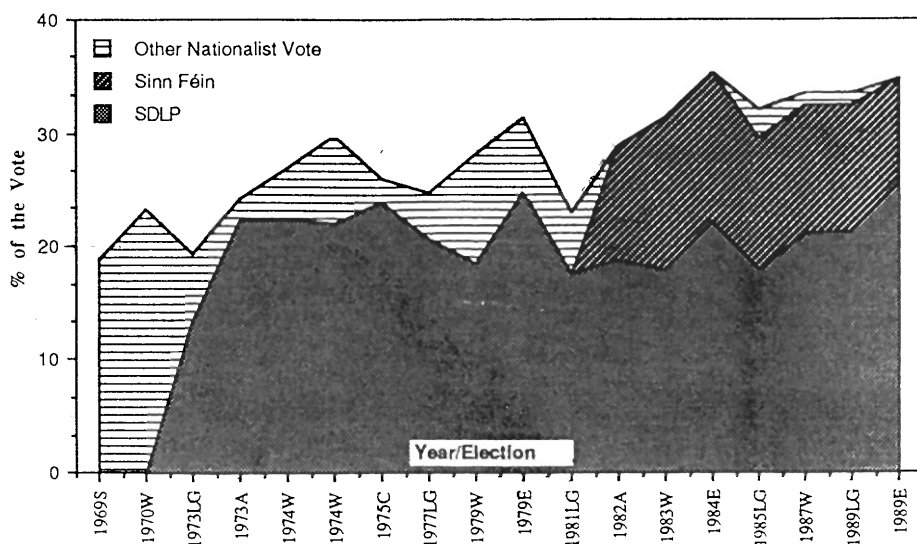


Figure 2. The Distribution of the Nationalist Vote. 1969-89.



essentially Catholic appeal. Its internal differences are over how to achieve territorial unification and the nature of a post-unification Ireland. 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 support is concentrated amongst the better-off, those who live west of the Bann and the over-30s. It rapidly consolidated its position as the principal nationalist party after contesting its first province-wide elections in 1973. Its fortunes 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 agreement. Other nationalist parties to 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 classification—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, has explicitly sought support as a non-sectarian socialist party. Just like the NILP used to be, Alliance and the WP are tacitly unionist, but not Unionist. They make no apologies for, and do not wish to return to, anything like the Stormont régime. They even have 'Irish dimensions': Alliance accepts the agreement, and the Workers' party is organised throughout Ireland.

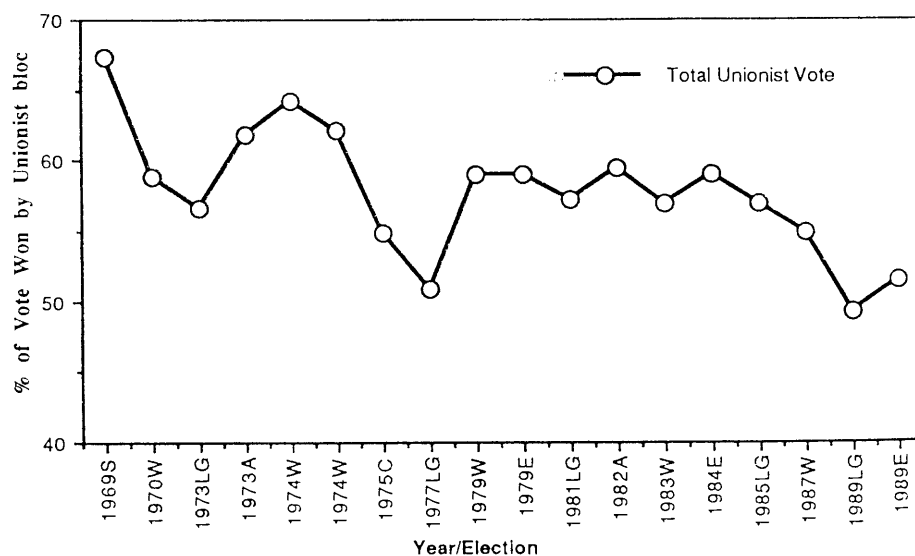
The *Other* category includes independents, ecologists and groups not easily classifiable into the other three blocs. Recently it has come to include the representatives of groups seeking to organise 'British' (ie Conservative, Labour, Liberal and SDP) political parties in Northern Ireland on a nominally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

Clear long-term trends emerge. First, since 1969 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 recomposed and fragmented at regular intervals. Although it has waxed it is now mostly waning.

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

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



clear and continuous upward trend. Indeed it would be even more marked but for the fact that I have removed the Workers' Party from the Nationalist bloc after 1981, even though the Republican Clubs were counted as a constituent component of the Nationalist bloc until 1979—the Workers' party now regards the 'national question' as a distraction from more salient 'class politics'.

Performances above trend in the Nationalist bloc occurred in the Westminster elections of October 1974 and the 1979 and 1984 European elections. The two European results reflect the high personal vote for John Hume, who gets votes from Catholics who might

otherwise have voted for the APNI. But the nationalist vote in the 1989 European elections seems part of the rising trend rather than a deviant result (although this may be an artefact of being the last point on the graph). The most notable performance below trend in the Nationalist bloc occurred in the 1981 local government elections—symptomatic of the considerable Catholic electoral alienation at the time of the hunger strikes.

Why has the nationalist vote risen so consistently? There are four distinct but not incompatible 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.

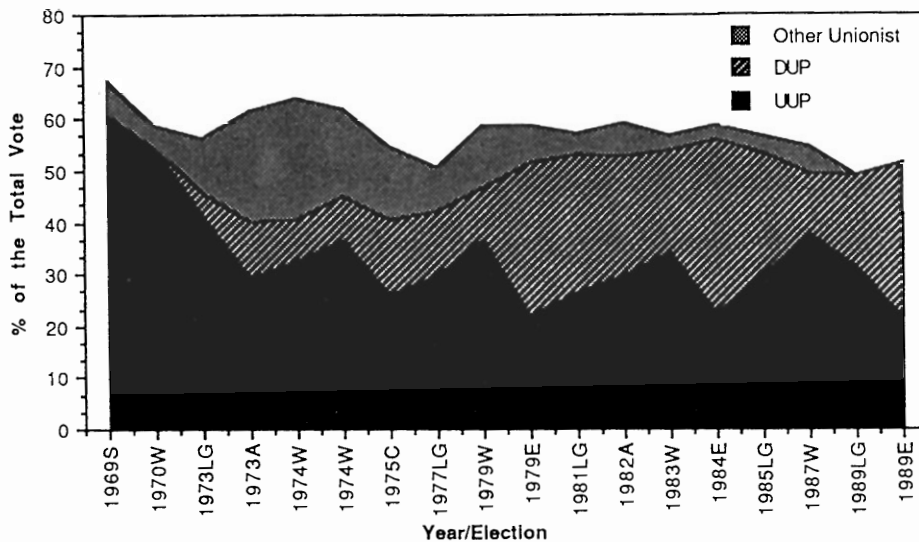
Second, psephological explanations suggest that the change in the voting system to STV increased Catholic participation. But the nationalist vote has also increased in first-past-the-post Westminster elections.

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 seats the greater probability 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 status of 'I' voters, only applies to local-government elections and cannot be responsible for long-run trends.

Finally, political explanations point to increased nationalist voting as symptomatic of

Figure 4. The Distribution of the Unionist Bloc Vote 1969-89.



the polarisation of Northern Ireland. Increased nationalist voting in the 1980s is the joint product of two key developments: Sinn Féin's mobilisation of previously abstentionist voters and the failure of British reforms 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 Féin's decision to participate in Northern Ireland elections boosted the total nationalist vote. Those who would place most stress on political explanations can also point to the collapse of the NILP, 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, reforming parties to entrench themselves in the Catholic population in a polarised and unreformed milieu in which such parties appear irrelevant.

Whatever the explanations, however, nationalist voting seems destined to go on rising, 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 Féin) is uncompromisingly committed to a pan-Irish solution to the Northern Ireland conflict, the Catholic population has become both absolutely and relatively more nationalist in its voting behaviour 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 59.8 per cent, and the median (most common) 60.5 per cent, whereas in the elections between 1981 and 1989 its mean vote was 55.6 per cent, its median 56.95 per cent. However, the end-points on the graph—67.4 per cent in 1969 and 51.4 per cent in the 1989 Euro-elections—illustrate the decline more starkly (if somewhat misleadingly).

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 less well in the 1980s, the Unionist bloc is now hovering at just over half of the voting electorate.

The other main factor reducing the unionist share of the vote has of course been the increased nationalist share. It is also obvious that,

if the organisation 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 1975 rapidly gave way to two-party competition between the UUP and the DUP. Over time 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 far exceeds the trend in support for his party. Second, in Westminster elections the UUP outpolls the DUP consistently. The latter elections being under the first-past-the-post system, incumbent UUP MPs have benefited from the fear that a vote for the DUP candidate would let in a nationalist challenger. The logic of this has obliged 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 fiercest in local government and assembly elections, where STV permits freer competition and the relevance of Mr Paisley's charisma is less salient. Fourth, the second and third features mentioned help explain why the DUP leadership is consistently more enthusiastic about devolution—if not power-sharing—than the UUP, and why the UUP, over-represented at Westminster, is more consistently in favour of integration.

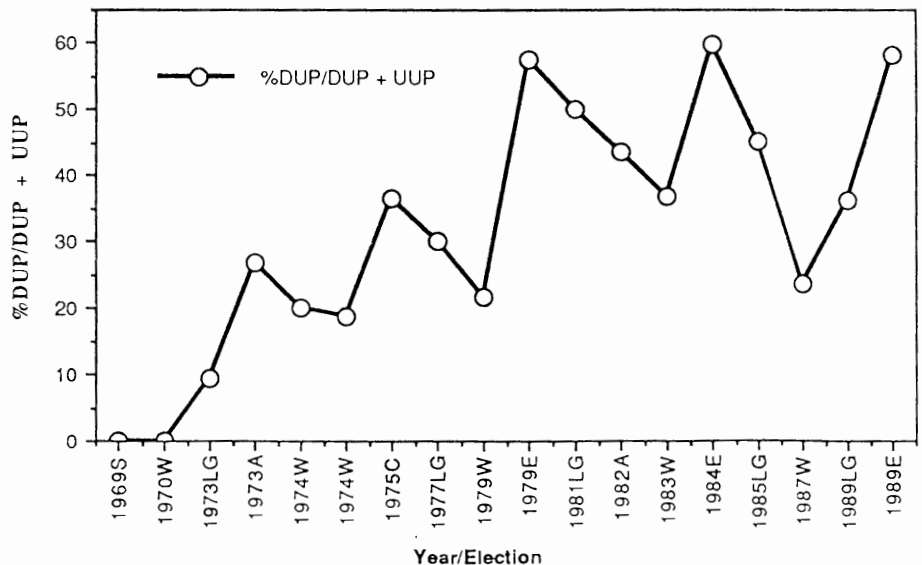
Finally, as Figure 5 suggests, all the elections held after the Anglo-Irish Agreement—the 1987 Westminster, the 1989 local government and the 1989 European elections—suggest a decline in support for the DUP as compared with the previous directly comparable election. In 1983, however, there was competition between the UUP and the DUP for Westminster seats, whereas in 1987 Mr Paisley made a pact with the UUP at the expense of his own party—it is unlikely to be repeated.

The long-term trend in the Unionist bloc is very slowly downwards, but it will 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 1990s, especially if the Conservative party organises throughout the province.

This could, unintendedly, marginally enhance the prospects for power-sharing coalitions in a future assembly. But if—as poll data suggest—support for the Conservatives is overwhelmingly concentrated amongst Protestants, the opposite effect may occur. Competition between the UUP and the Conservatives may lead their Northern Ireland supporters to reject both 'devolution' and 'power-sharing' as 'foreign' and 'non-British' ideas. Such competition would block the prospects for agreed devolution since an SDLP-DUP-APNI coalition government still seems an idea for fantasists.

The parties which have not been organised explicitly in terms of the 'national question', and which have sought bi- or non-confessional support, have been squeezed over time since 1969, even though Alliance did experience a surge in the mid- and late 1970s. Figure 6 illustrates the fortunes of the NILP, the APNI,

Figure 5. DUP share of DUP + UUP vote. 1973-1989.



the WP and the residual 'Other' category. It demonstrates that peaks of support for this bloc have declined over time, suggesting a steady decline overall. The NILP, the biggest single party opposing the UUP in the Stormont elections of 1969, was squeezed rapidly in the polarisation that accompanied the onset of 'the troubles'. Nor was Alliance's initial growth sustained, while the WP has failed to make any 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 prospects of power-sharing. The other troughs have occurred in European elections. There are two plausible explanations for this apparently anomalous result. First, the European contests polarise 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 their 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 'moderate' against the 'extremist' (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-

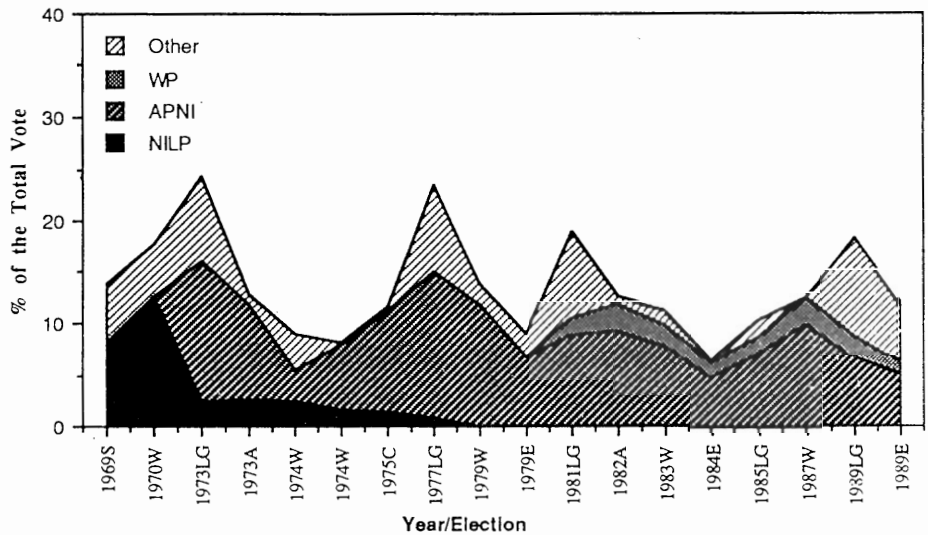
elections thus show that voting behaviour in Northern Ireland is rationally affected both by the voting system and the organisation of constituency boundaries. It is not simply a Pavlovian reflection of the balance of sectarian forces.

One interesting question arises about the 'Other' bloc. How should one classify the groups organising for British political parties and their supporters? Are they Unionist bloc integrationists in new clothes or genuinely non-confessional? The enthusiastic activists for

this strategy seem in the main to be non-sectarian. But the same cannot be said of their potential supporters. If support for the new Conservative party organisations 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—their 'non-sectarian' status will remain a moot point.

• **Concluded next month**

Figure 6. Non-Confessional Bloc and Other Bloc. 1969-1989.



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**Party performances before and after the Anglo-Irish Agreement:  
share of the vote of Unionist and Nationalist blocs (%)**

DUP	Before	After	Net change
Westminster	1983:20	1987:12	-8.3
Local government	1985:24	1989:18	-6.5
European	1984:34	1989:30	-3.7
<b>UUP</b>	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>	<b>Net change</b>
Westminster	1983:34	1987:38	+3.8
Local government	1985:30	1989:31	+1.9
European	1984:22	1989:22	0
<b>SDLP</b>	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>	<b>Net change</b>
Westminster	1983:18	1987:21	+3.2
Local government	1985:18	1989:21	+3.3
European	1984:22	1989:26	+3.4
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>	<b>Net change</b>
Westminster	1983:13	1987:11	-2.0
Local government	1985:12	1989:11	-0.5
European	1984:13	1989:9	-4.1

Notes: The vote share figures are rounded but 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.

disillusioned with their natural parties' campaign against the agreement.

The architects of the agreement could reasonably conclude that it had produced some movement in squeezing loyalist extremists, but without bringing forth a decisive accommodating response on power-sharing from within the UUP. Indeed, the shift towards the UUP since Hillsborough may have marked a retreat for the prospects of power-sharing devolution, since the UUP is more integrationist than its DUP rival. Facing Conservative electoral competition, moreover, its integrationist wing has become more ascendant.

This new wave of enthusiasm for integrationism, albeit primarily electoral—seeking the organisation of British political parties in the province—has been an unintended by-product of the agreement, and unwelcome from the perspective of those committed to agreed devolution. Garret FitzGerald told me that integrationist movements were an "irrelevance", distracting attention away from political accommodation between unionists and nationalists.

Optimists about the political process initiated at Hillsborough observe, however, that—partly because of the reverses it has sustained and partly under the energetic prompting of Peter Robinson—the DUP has shifted away from simple majority-rule devolutionism. If the episode at Duisberg in 1988 can be taken seriously, key figures in the party are now seeking a devolved government which the minority can accept—although of course they still want the Anglo-Irish Agreement to go.

Within the *Nationalist bloc* the Anglo-Irish Agreement has more clearly achieved its authors' objectives—though the shift in party support has been smaller than amongst unionists. It has halted the growth of the Sinn Féin vote, and shows some signs of reversing it: the SF vote fell in each of the three post-Hillsborough elections by comparison with the corresponding preceding three. And the SDLP's position, while not hegemonic, has been decisively restored: it has stemmed and reversed the SF tide, albeit within a growing Nationalist bloc. So the framers of the agreement have some cause for satisfaction: extremist nationalism has been squeezed, although considerable reform of Northern Ireland will be required to reduce it further.

The architects of the agreement did not

# Beyond the blocs

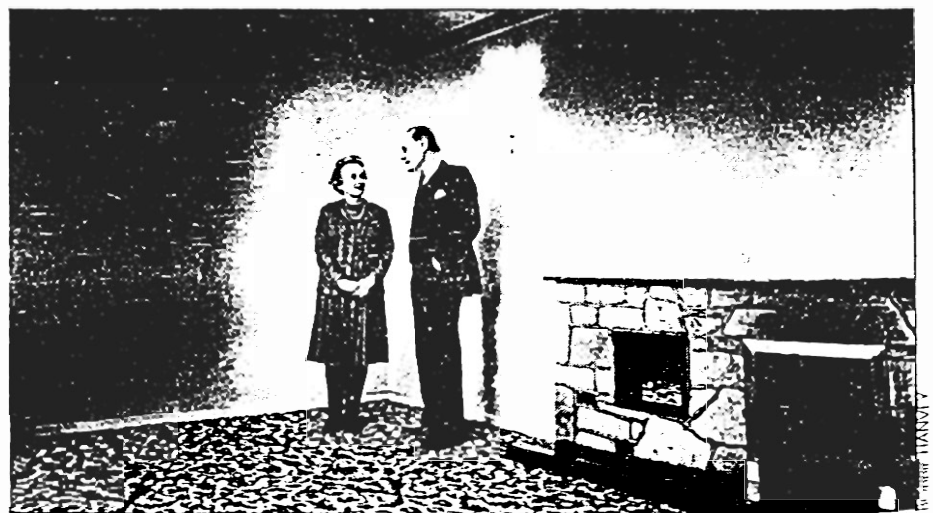
In *Fortnight* 281, BRENDAN O'LEARY surveyed voting patterns in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years. Here he takes a closer look at the impact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement on electoral behaviour.

**T**HE 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 trends—they hoped it would reverse the growth of Sinn Féin and stabilise support for the constitutional nationalists in the SDLP, 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 1989. In all three elections held after the signing of the agreement, including last year's European election, Mr Paisley's party failed to match its share in the corresponding elections before the agreement. The DUP's militancy failed to bring any dividends, and its pact with the UUP in the Westminster elections of 1987 guaranteed that its showing would appear even 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—to 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 election. 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 no doubt, but others



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