
Northern Ireland: Flanking Extremists Bite the Moderates and Emerge in Their Clothes

BY PAUL MITCHELL, BRENDAN O'LEARY AND GEOFFREY EVANS

AFTER signing the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement it was the considered policy of the sovereign governments to isolate what they called the 'political extremes' in Northern Ireland and build up what they called the 'moderate centre-ground', from which a power-sharing government could be constructed. The policy did not work, at least not quickly and not as intended, but the Agreement did generate the environment from which came a peace process and a political settlement. The peace process, initially reluctantly welcomed by the sovereign governments, but eventually embraced, first by the Reynolds government, then sceptically by the Major government, and then more enthusiastically by the Blair government, turned the original logic on its head.¹ The extremes were to be integrated, if they wanted to be. John Hume, the leader of the SDLP, kick-started the public side of the process by talking with Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin in 1988 and again in the early 1990s; and that eventually led to everyone (except some in Ian Paisley's DUP) talking with Adams and his colleagues. In short, the paramilitary cessations of violence, and later the historic compromise, the Belfast Agreement of Good Friday 10 April 1998, were achieved by enticing political hardliners into a political and institutional settlement in which they have a stake.

Politics is transformative of identities, as well as a mechanism for their expression and defence, and what was most fascinating about the 2001 Westminster general election in Northern Ireland was the metamorphosis of both Sinn Féin and the DUP. Despite misleading rhetoric to the contrary, both 'extreme' parties moderated their platforms, and may continue to do so, and this softening of their positions partly explains their electoral successes. An era of full anti-system politics which had seen the abstention and exclusion of Sinn Féin, and the frequent self-exclusion ('Ulster just says "no"') of the DUP, is being succeeded by an era of active negotiations, legislative and committee-room politics. These parties, for the time being, have become stake-

holders in the panoply of institutions established by the Belfast Agreement—the Northern Ireland Assembly and its novel Executive, the North-South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council, the British-Irish intergovernmental conference, the British-Irish inter-parliamentary body. The creation of these institutions, to put it mildly, were neither Sinn Féin's nor the DUP's first preference, but their consociational and confederal logics² have given both sufficient incentives to participate in styles that are less overtly anti-system than their historic credentials would have suggested.

The absolute—if ultimately futile—opposition of the DUP to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, and its more nuanced opposition to the Belfast Agreement—working within (most of) its institutions, including its executive, but criticising Sinn Féin—led to subtle shifts in the DUP's position as the elections approached. Far from calling for the Belfast Agreement to be scrapped, the DUP called for its renegotiation. The DUP's best-known rallying cries ('No Surrender') and absolute opposition to any 'Dublin interference' in Northern Ireland had morphed by 2001 into a demand that any North-South institutional relationships be rendered more palatable by requiring that they be made more fully accountable to the devolved administration in Belfast. Such changes in its positioning, ably directed by DUP deputy leader and campaign manager Peter Robinson MP, repositioned the party more competitively, especially in relation to the disaffected supporters of an openly fractious Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). The DUP had a long history as a party that favoured devolution, and neither the party nor many of its potential supporters wanted to bring down the new Assembly, they just wanted it run in a different manner, without Sinn Féin in government.³

More obviously, Sinn Féin has also progressively moderated its position (notwithstanding current difficulties over decommissioning by the IRA). Since 1996 the party has been the principal electoral beneficiary of an end to active war. The IRA's cessation of its armed campaign, Sinn Féin's *de facto* acceptance of the consent principle (i.e. that Irish unification requires the consent of majorities in both parts of Ireland) and its enthusiastic participation in all of the Agreement's institutions have rendered the party more acceptable to others and more relevant to nationalist voters. While the peace process was the handmaiden of Sinn Féin's electoral 'second coming',⁴ the incorporation of Sinn Féin into 'ordinary politics' has undermined the distinctiveness of the SDLP's own strategic position faster than anticipated. Especially for younger nationalist voters, the question increasingly arises: why not vote for the fresher and more assertive brand? For them the SDLP looked aged, and some of its Europeanist and 'post-national' talk cut little ice with voters focused on local issues and quarrels. While it is hard to imagine that the peace process could have been sustained without some electoral rewards for Sinn Féin, few expected the pace

of its gains since 1994, and especially its breakout performance in 2001.

Overview of the results

Let us first overview the most dramatic findings of the 2001 Westminster elections. We can do this, first by reviewing the electoral map of Northern Ireland, with that of 1997 (see Figure 1), and then by means of a graphic ‘profit and loss account’ (in absolute votes; see Figure 2). The upper map shows Northern Ireland’s eighteen constituencies. The middle and lower maps confirm the significance of the 2001 result. Nationalists went from holding five to seven of Northern Ireland’s eighteen seats. The constituencies which border Ireland are now entirely nationalist: southern and western Northern Ireland have nationalist MPs running in a swathe from Foyle, through West Tyrone, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and South Armagh, to South Down. The west has been ‘deep greened’, with three adjacent Sinn Féin constituencies (West Tyrone, Mid-Ulster and Fermanagh-South Tyrone); and in the future South Armagh and possibly Foyle may fall to Sinn Féin with the eventual retirement of the prominent SDLP incumbents, party leader John Hume MP, MEP, and the Deputy First Minister Seamus Mallon MP. Sinn Féin’s two best-known leaders, Adams and Martin McGuinness, hold the two nationalist seats away from the border, in mid-Ulster and West Belfast.

The map also confirms that unionists’ demographic grip on Northern Ireland is slipping—they are retreating into their heartlands of North Armagh, North Down, Antrim and East Londonderry. A ring of DUP seats now flanks this heartland. Belfast, the distinctive epicentre of conflict, is becoming increasingly greener: the local government results held on the same day as the Westminster elections confirmed that Sinn Féin is the largest party in the city. But in 2001 unionists took three of its four Westminster (DUP: 2, UUP: 1). In the long run, with changing demography and with this electoral system,⁵ it seems feasible that South Belfast may go to the SDLP and North Belfast to Sinn Féin.

The DUP had its best ever Westminster election, in seats and vote-share, and Sinn Féin for the fifth consecutive election had by far its strongest result. The much-touted moderate ground, and the centre of ‘others’, of Northern Ireland politics appears to be sinking (see Figure 2). The fact that the DUP and Sinn Féin have partly achieved such gains by stealing the moderates’ positions is likely to be of limited comfort to the UUP and SDLP, the formerly pre-eminent parties in the unionist and nationalist blocs respectively, who are now left, if not naked, at least partially disrobed.

Context and campaign

It was the first Westminster election since the Belfast Agreement had been signed, and partially implemented. The referendum to ratify the

Figure 1. Electoral Map of Northern Ireland, 1997 and 2001

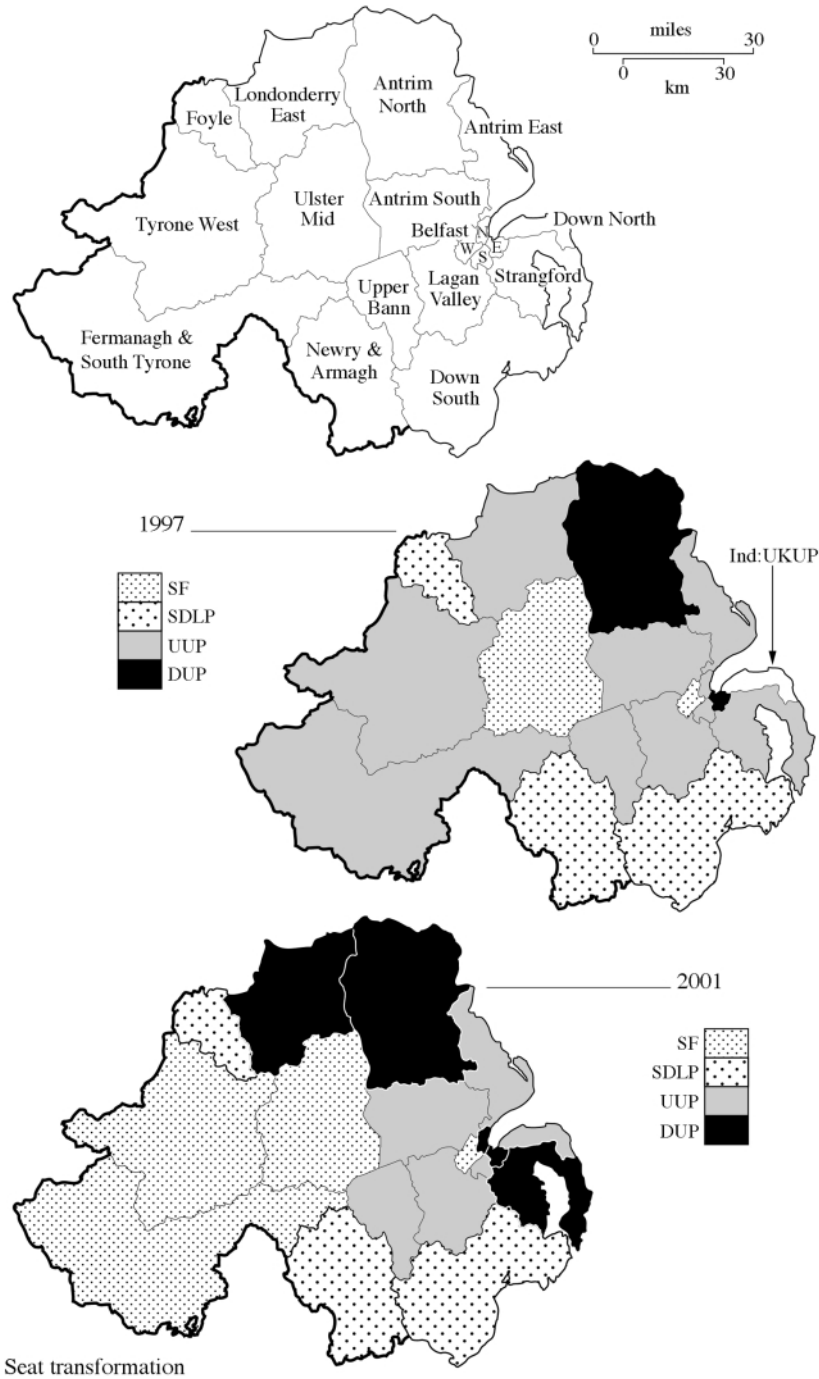
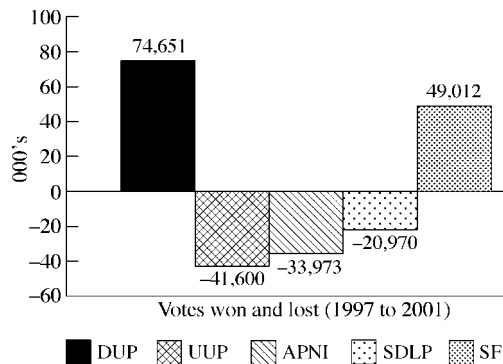


Figure 2. Profit and Loss Account of Westminster Votes in 2001

Source: Calculated by the authors from electoral returns.

Agreement in May 1998 led to almost unanimous endorsement by nationalists, North and South. By contrast, it split unionists evenly into 'Yes' and 'No' camps, and their parties likewise: the UUP was for the Agreement, as were the small loyalist parties, the PUP and the UDP; the DUP was against, as was the small UKUP. The pro-Agreement UUP was itself deeply divided. A majority of its Westminster MPs opposed the Agreement, isolating its party leader David Trimble, though as the First Minister of the Assembly he had much stronger support amongst his Assembly members (MLAs).

The general election was called during a local crisis. Though the Agreement's institutions were functioning, deep fissures had erupted within the UUP and rendered Trimble very vulnerable. To compel Sinn Féin to coerce the IRA to start decommissioning its weapons he had embarked on a series of political sanctions. First, he blocked the two Sinn Féin ministers in the power-sharing executive from participating in the North-South Ministerial Council. The Sinn Féin Ministers and the SDLP Deputy First Minister,⁶ Seamus Mallon, promptly took Trimble to court, and won, but Justice Kerr ruled his action 'unlawful' in January 2001. Trimble immediately appealed the decision—pending at the time of composition, but likely to go against him. Then just before the UK general election began, Trimble repeated the tactic he had deployed in 2000; he wrote a post-dated resignation letter, effective on July 1 2001, which he declared he would make effective if the IRA failed to move on decommissioning. His long-run calculation was that if his resignation became effective then the UK government would have to choose between suspending the Agreement's institutions (Trimble's preferred default), or leaving the Assembly to trigger fresh elections, because of its failure to replace the First and Deputy First Ministers within six weeks (12 August 2001). His short-run calculation appears to have been that the resignation threat would immunise him, and his

party's candidates, from criticism from other unionists over their willingness to share government with Sinn Féin in the absence of IRA decommissioning. Neither calculation was especially shrewd.

Nationalists had spent much of the year before the election trying to redress the UK government's failures to live up to its public promises faithfully to implement the Patten Report on policing, in letter and in spirit, as mandated by the Agreement. These failures were in turn used within the nationalist community to justify the IRA's failure to put its weapons verifiably beyond use, though it had twice supervised international inspections of its arms-dumps as a confidence-building measure, and organised one of these just before the general election. The SDLP had done considerable work at Westminster to amend what became the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, but neither the Act nor the published implementation plans delivered the full Patten, only 'Patten lite'. Sinn Féin and the SDLP therefore made police reform and the full Patten report one of the central planks in their election campaigns—taking stances at odds with both the UUP and the DUP. Feedback from constituencies in unionist safe seats suggested that the UUP lost support to the DUP because of the scale of police reform, while the SDLP lost support to Sinn Féin amongst young nationalists because of the insufficiency of police reform, and because the SDLP appeared more pliant.

The campaign was conducted according to the logic of a dual party system, with competition within the unionist and nationalist blocs being much more important than competition across the blocs.⁷ Unlike all other elections in Northern Ireland—local government, Assembly and European—the Westminster election is held under single-constituency plurality rule. One might therefore have expected to see some tacit agreement within the blocs to support a leading candidate in each constituency, to prevent the other bloc from winning a seat. That logic used to operate, especially within the unionist bloc where the imperative to keep out nationalists had restrained the DUP from campaigning against vulnerable UUP incumbents in 1997. Yet within the nationalist bloc, this logic has not operated at all in recent times, because the SDLP had not been prepared to organise pacts with a party associated with support for violence.

One might also have expected the fact that local government elections were being held on the same day, under the single-transferable vote (STV) system of proportional representation, to have restrained rhetorical criticism of rival parties within each bloc. There was no such spill-over effect amongst party strategies. The parties fought each system separately, seeking to win under plurality rule at Westminster, while trying to maximise first preference and lower-order STV transfers in the local government ballots.

Competition within the unionist bloc, with the exception of Fermanagh and South Tyrone,⁸ was unrestrained. The DUP did not stand in

North Down in order to give anti-Agreement Robert McCartney (UK Unionist Party) a chance of holding his seat. The DUP personally targeted Trimble as a vacillating traitor. Its cartoons lampooned him as a bent-over old man with a long flowing white beard and a resignation letter stuck in his pocket with the caption 'Trust me. I will not wait indefinitely for IRA decommissioning'; its website mocked him as the IRA's delivery boy; it declared 'trust' in politicians was its central concern. For the local government elections the DUP advised its voters to give their lower-order preferences to 'like-minded', that is anti-Agreement, unionists. The DUP's combination of hard-hitting attacks on Trimble, and its offer not to cause chaos, merely to renegotiate the Agreement, paid handsome dividends. Though it did not run candidates in four constituencies it came within a hair's breadth of becoming the largest unionist party in vote-share and seat-share in a Westminster general election. The party's one significant setback was to lose the seat it had gained in a by-election from the UUP, the Reverend William McCrea losing to David Burnside of the UUP.

The UUP leader managed to get all his party's candidates to stand uncomfortably behind a common pro-Agreement platform, albeit one that heavily emphasised the need to achieve IRA decommissioning. This fooled no one, as many of his incumbent MPs (especially William Ross, William Thompson, and the Reverend Martin Smyth) were known to be anti-Agreement, and they tried to stave off criticism from the DUP by emphasising their anti-Agreement credentials. This, of course, merely added to the party's public disarray, aggravated when one of its elderly incumbent MPs, Cecil Walker, put in an embarrassing television performance that threw away the North Belfast seat to the DUP's Nigel Dodds MLA. The UUP's solitary success in nomination strategy was to run a new pro-Agreement candidate, Lady Sylvia Hermon, in North Down, where she toppled McCartney. In the local government elections Trimble advised that voters should 'primarily consider pro-Union candidates after the UUP', rather than other pro-Agreement candidates (BBC website, 26 May), the line taken by the SDLP. This advice made it less likely that small numbers of pro-Agreement Catholics would vote tactically for pro-Agreement UUP candidates.

Within the nationalist bloc Sinn Féin fought an energetic, disciplined, and well-funded campaign. The party's coffers are now swelled by legitimate fund-raising in both parts of Ireland and the USA, and it probably has more activists than any other party in Northern Ireland. It sought to increase its vote share (standing candidates in every one of the 18 constituencies), its seat-share, and to get the nationalist electorate's endorsement for the Agreement, and its stances on policing, demilitarisation and decommissioning. In the republican priority list, the latter was usually last amongst the matters needing to be implemented to fulfil everyone's obligations under the Agreement. Sinn Féin's success in achieving extraordinarily high turnouts, both in its safe and

its target seats, is detailed below. Its vote-share rose in every constituency in Northern Ireland, except South Belfast, where it made no tactical sense to vote for the party's candidate. Sinn Féin appear to have won most of the new young nationalist voters, who endorsed the party even in locations where there was an SDLP incumbent, or where the SDLP candidate appeared to have the better chance of winning. Sinn Féin expected to win West Tyrone, where an even nationalist split in the vote had allowed William Thompson of the UUP victory in 1997; but it did not expect its candidate Michelle Gildernew to be so successful in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

The SDLP's strategy was to portray itself as the key pro-Agreement party, one that had made the peace process and the Agreement possible, and one with a wider social democratic and good governance agenda. It trumpeted its successes in bringing together a programme of government out of the four parties in the Executive. It resisted appeals by the Alliance Party to form a pro-Agreement pact on seats, as did the UUP. The SDLP hoped to hold and slightly expand its vote-share, and to take one additional seat. In fact its total vote fell, but not by that much, in comparison with 1997—only approximately 20,000 across Northern Ireland. It targeted West Tyrone, withdrawing precious resources from Belfast, to support its high profile and Executive Minister for Agriculture Brid Rogers against the Sinn Féin Vice President Pat Doherty, to no avail.

The inter-ethnic or non-ethnic 'Others', principally the Alliance Party, were crushed in 2001. By comparison with previous elections, not only did the flanking parties take huge chunks from the moderates within their own blocs, but the moderates appear to have eroded the support of the Others, who also made tactical decisions to sacrifice their own prospects. The Alliance's proposals to make pro-Agreement candidate arrangements were firmly rebuffed by the UUP and SDLP, who were determined to maximise their share of the vote (*Irish News*, 3.4.01, 10.3.01).

The campaign once again highlighted the unreliability of polls in Northern Ireland, at least insofar as voters' intentions are concerned: they consistently understate the intensity of their political preferences. If the public had been anywhere near as moderate as they have generally represented themselves to pollsters during the last three decades there would not have been a Northern Ireland question. A *Belfast Telegraph/ Irish Independent* poll conducted by Irish Marketing Services published on 22 May suggested that the UUP, with 25% of respondents likely to vote for it, was 11 percentage points ahead of the DUP (14%), and that the SDLP (25%), was 9 percentage points ahead of Sinn Féin (16%). The poll did pick up two significant pointers: the young unionists are the most anti-Agreement, and in the 18–24 cohorts, Sinn Féin is the most popular party with 24% (compared with 15% for the UUP, 14% for the DUP and 13% for the SDLP, a portent of things to come).

Analysis of the results

The 2001 Westminster elections were the most exciting and dramatic that have ever occurred in Northern Ireland. While political scientists and journalists are fond of saying that a particular election was ‘dull’, Westminster elections in Northern Ireland have often seemed like a contest of the moribund. With only a small number of seats available, incumbents generally well ‘dug in’, little partisan change and few floating voters in an ethnic party system, change has appeared glacial.⁹ This is not to say that alignments have been frozen and that nothing interesting ever happened, but dramatic gains and losses have been rare by any standards. For example, if we compare the change in vote shares of the five main parties in Northern Ireland (UUP, DUP, SDLP, SF and APNI) in Westminster elections, the volatility index at successive elections was 7% in 1987, 5.2% in 1992, 7.2% in 1997, but then doubled in 2001 to 14.5%.¹⁰ To put this in perspective, the average aggregate volatility for nineteen European countries in the 1980s and 1990s was 9.2% and 11.5% respectively (for the UK alone, 3.3% and 9.3% in the same periods).¹¹ Similarly, seats very rarely changed hands between parties,¹² whereas in 2001 seven seats changed partisan control and three incumbents survived by narrow margins. In short, in 2001 Northern Ireland had a genuinely competitive and perhaps a watershed election.

Bloc performance

Before considering the performance of parties in detail, let us take stock of the overall bloc changes. In *Britain Votes 1997*, two of the present authors began with what they called a bold and falsifiable prediction. This was that the 1997 Westminster election would likely be the last in which the Unionist (with a capital ‘U’) bloc would win an overall majority of the votes cast in Northern Ireland.¹³ At the 1997 general election the total U bloc (the UUP, DUP, UKUP, PUP, UDP and Conservatives) had managed just 50.5% of the total vote, compared with 40.2% for the Nationalist bloc, comprising the SDLP and Sinn Féin. Although the small Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI) supports the Union, it is usually not defined as part of the U bloc because of its moderate, bi-confessional and inter-ethnic position. In 2001 the prediction was falsified, although the logic behind the prediction is likely to prove accurate about future trends. In 2001 the U bloc actually improved its position to 52.1%, though the nationalist bloc grew by even more to 42.7% (see Table 1 and Figure 3). The interesting question is: why did the U bloc not only hold its own but even manage a modest improvement?

Especially since 1996, unionist politicians and commentators have often explained unionists’ less than optimal performances as due to differential abstentionism. In the absence of a full-scale election study

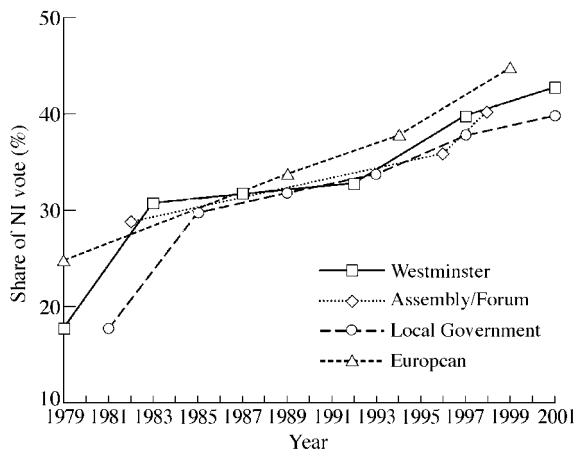
1. The Results of the 2001 Westminster General Elections in Northern Ireland

Party	Votes	Votes	Seats	Seats	Seats	S-V
	%	Change	N	Change	%	%
	2001	1997-2001	2001	1997-2001	2001	2001
UUP	26.8	-5.9	6	-4	33.3	6.5
DUP	22.5	8.9	5	3	27.8	5.3
UKUP	1.7	0.1	0	-1	-	-1.7
PUP	0.6	-0.8	0	-	-	-0.6
Conservatives	0.3	-0.9	0	-	-	-0.3
NI Unionist	0.2	-	0	-	-	-0.2
Total U bloc	52.1	1.6	11	-2	61.1	9
Sinn Féin	21.7	5.6	4	2	22.2	0.5
SDLP	21	-3.1	3	-	16.7	-4.3
Total N bloc	42.7	2.5	7	2	38.9	-3.8
APNI	3.6	-4.4	0	-	-	-3.6
NIWC	0.4	-	0	-	-	-0.4
WP	0.3	-	0	-	-	-0.3
Others	0.9	-0.1	0	-	-	-
Disproportionality in 2001			7.3			
Mean disproportionality (1981-97)			18.7			

Notes: (1) The measure of disproportionality used is the least squares index (LSq) devised by Michael Gallagher (1991). Disproportionality $\sqrt{1/2\sum(V_i-S_i)^2}$. Lijphart regards the least squares method as 'the most sensitive and faithful reflection of the disproportionality of election results' (1994: 62). 'Others' and independents have been excluded from the calculations. The 'others' (0.9%) are excluded since they are not a unified bargaining actor. However, their inclusion would make only a marginal difference. (2) The UKUP vote can no longer be considered a 'party vote'—it is effectively a one-person party. All of the UKUP's 13,509 Westminster votes were for Bob McCartney. In the District Council elections the UKUP's eleven candidates managed only 0.6% of the total vote (4,763 votes). Source: Calculated from election returns. Table format based on Table 4.4 in P. Mitchell, 'The Party System and Party Competition' in P. Mitchell and R. Wilford (eds), *Politics in Northern Ireland*, Westview, 1999.

(estimating which individual voters actually went to the polls) we have no direct information on the differential turnout of the unionist and nationalist blocs. An indirect analysis confirms that turnout does appear

Figure 3. The Ever-Growing Nationalist Vote-Share in Northern Ireland, 1979-2001



Source: O'Leary and Evans op. cit., updated by the authors.

2. The Turnout Wars

	'Unionist'	'Nationalist'	'Balanced'	N Lead
Number	10	6	2	–
Average turnout in 1998 Assembly election (%)	64.6	74.9	72.5	10.3
Average turnout in 2001 Westminster election (%)	63.6	74.3	70.9	10.7

Notes: The table shows average turnout by constituency type. 'Unionist' constituencies are those in which at least four of the elected assembly members in 1998 self-identified as unionists in the Assembly (UUP, DUP, PUP, UKUP or independent unionist). Similarly 'nationalist' constituencies are those in which at least four of the elected members belonged to either the SDLP or Sinn Féin. This leaves two 'balanced' constituencies: Fermanagh South-Tyrone elected three nationalists (2 SF, 1 SDLP) and three unionists (2 UUP, 1 DUP); Belfast South elected three unionists (2 UUP, 1 DUP), two nationalists (2 SDLP) and one 'other' (NIWC). The comparison is possible because the constituencies have not changed geographically (the Assembly election involved selecting six members from each Westminster constituency), though of course we are comparing across electoral systems. Source: Adapted and updated from P. Mitchell, 'Transcending an Ethnic Party System? The Impact of Consociational Governance on Electoral Dynamics and the Party System' in R. Wilford (ed.), *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

to be lower in unionist strongholds.¹⁴ As explained in the note to Table 2, the 18 Westminster constituencies (which in the 1998 Assembly elections served as multi-member constituencies, returning six members each) can be delineated into predominantly 'unionist', nationalist and 'balanced' constituencies on the basis of the 1998 results. For example, a predominantly 'unionist constituency' for the purposes of Table 2 is one in which at least four of the members returned to the 1998 Assembly self-identified as unionist.¹⁵ The results in 1998 were clear and quite dramatic: the average turnout in 'unionist constituencies' was 64.6%, just over 10% *lower* than in 'nationalist constituencies'. Differential turnout is, of course, an important competitive dynamic in ethnic party systems, and these results may suggest that the unionist vote had been depressed by a lower willingness of unionists to turn out and vote, partly because there has often been a safe incumbent and no-intra-unionist competition. Thus, a plausible explanation of the U bloc's improved position in 2001 is that the unionist parties were more successful in mobilising some of their more apathetic partisans in the context of a Westminster election that everyone believed would be the most competitive ever. After all, fear of losing seats to ethnic rivals is one of the classic motivators in such segmented party systems. But plausible as this proposition may seem, Table 2 indicates that it is incorrect. In 2001, as in previous elections, nationalists won the turnout wars: indeed the N bloc was even further ahead of the U bloc on this occasion (a lead of 10.7%).

So how did the U bloc vote stay above 50%? The simplest explanation is much more prosaic than complex considerations of differential constituency turnout. Quite simply the U bloc in 2001 had one significant competitor missing: the Alliance party deployed candidates in only ten constituencies, seven fewer than in 1997, in effect sacrificing itself. The Alliance party, in attempting to maximise the chances of the leading pro-Agreement candidate in several constituencies, paid the price of seeing its own percentage vote cut in half (see Table 3). In several

3. Constituency Electoral Dynamics by Bloc Marginality: Order of Party Placement and Share of Vote (%)

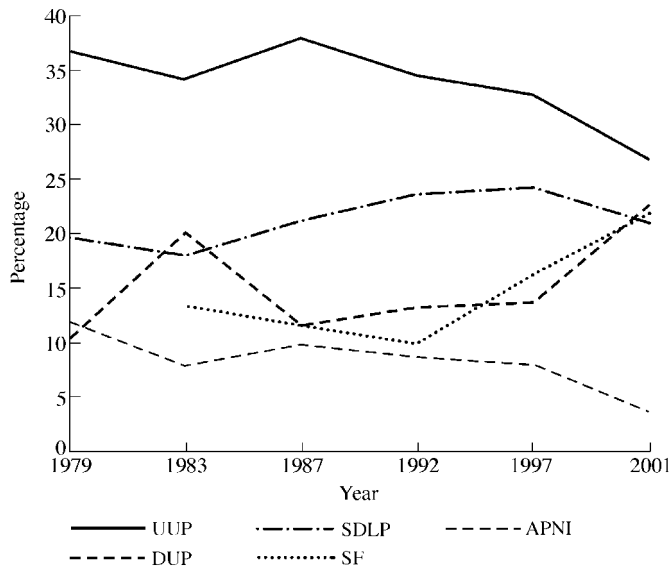
Order	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
'Safe' unionist seats					
North Down	UUP 56.0	UKUP 36.3	SDLP 3.4	Con 2.2	SF 0.8
Strangford	DUP 42.8	UUP 40.3	APNI 6.7	SDLP 6.1	SF 2.2
East Antrim	UUP 36.4	DUP 36.0	APNI 12.5	SDLP 7.3	Ind 3.0
South Antrim	UUP 37.1	DUP 34.8	SDLP 12.1	SF 9.4	APNI 4.5
North Antrim	DUP 49.9	UUP 21.0	SDLP 16.8	SF 9.8	APNI 2.6
Lagan Valley	UUP 56.5	APNI 16.6	DUP 13.4	SDLP 7.5	SF 5.9
East Belfast	DUP 42.5	UUP 23.2	APNI 15.8	PUP 10.0	SF 3.4
Upper Bann	UUP 33.5	DUP 29.5	SF 21.1	SDLP 14.9	WP 1.0
East Londonderry	DUP 32.1	UUP 27.4	SDLP 20.8	SF 15.6	APNI 4.1
'Safe' nationalist seats					
West Belfast	SF 66.1	SDLP 18.9	DUP 6.4	UUP 6.2	WP 1.8
Foyle	SDLP 50.2	SF 26.6	DUP 15.2	UUP 6.9	APNI 1.2
West Tyrone	SF 40.8	UUP 28.7	SDLP 28.7	–	–
Newry and Armagh	SDLP 37.4	SF 30.9	DUP 19.4	UUP 12.3	–
Mid Ulster	SF 51.1	DUP 31.1	SDLP 16.8	WP 1.0	–
South Down	SDLP 46.3	SF 19.7	UUP 17.6	DUP 15.0	APNI 1.3
Marginals					
North Belfast	DUP 40.8	SF 25.2	SDLP 21.0	UUP 12.0	WP 0.6
South Belfast	UUP 44.8	SDLP 30.6	NIWC 7.8	SF 7.6	APNI 5.4
Fermanagh S.T.	SF 34.1	UUP 34.0	SDLP 18.7	Ind U 13.2	–

Note: Within each category (e.g. 'Safe' unionist seats) the constituencies are listed in descending order from 'most safe' to 'most marginal' by ethno-national bloc. For example, West Belfast is the safest nationalist seat given that the combined Sinn Féin and SDLP vote is 85%. 'Marginal' constituencies are cases in which there is less than a 10% difference between the blocs (and of course 10% swings are certainly attainable in plurality elections, even if more difficult in ethnic party systems). For example, in the most marginal seat, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, the N bloc managed 52.1% to the U bloc's 47.2%. Of course, nomination strategies often determine who actually wins. For example, if a second unionist candidate had not been present in Fermanagh (the independent unionist anti-Agreement candidate, Jim Dixon) the UUP would have won this seat. Attenuating U bloc competition by fielding a single unionist candidate is precisely the method by which unionists have managed to win in majority nationalist constituencies such as Fermanagh in previous elections. For similar tables of earlier Westminster seat distributions see O'Leary and Evans, *op. cit.*, for 1997 and Mitchell (1995) for the 1983, 1987 and 1992 elections.

constituencies the UUP was a major beneficiary. Indeed, if most of Alliance's 7,553 votes in 1997 in North Down, historically the Alliance's strongest constituency, transferred to the UUP candidate in 2001 to defeat the anti-Agreement incumbent, as was the APNI's intention, then this 'gift' alone constitutes two-thirds of the U bloc's entire gains in 2001.¹⁶

The results in 2001 were a triumph for the DUP and Sinn Féin; but big winners also beget big losers. The biggest of the losers was the UUP, now merely a front-runner compared with its former hegemonic domination of Northern Ireland politics. While 2001 certainly constituted the UUP's worst-ever Westminster election, in which for the first time in the modern party system it plummeted significantly below the 30% barrier to only 26.8%, it can be seen from Figure 4 that this is just the latest dip in a long-term decline.¹⁷ By contrast, the trend line for the other big loser in 2001—the SDLP—had been a gentle but steady incline, benefiting from a growing Catholic population and a progressively more nationalist electorate. While the SDLP vote continued to

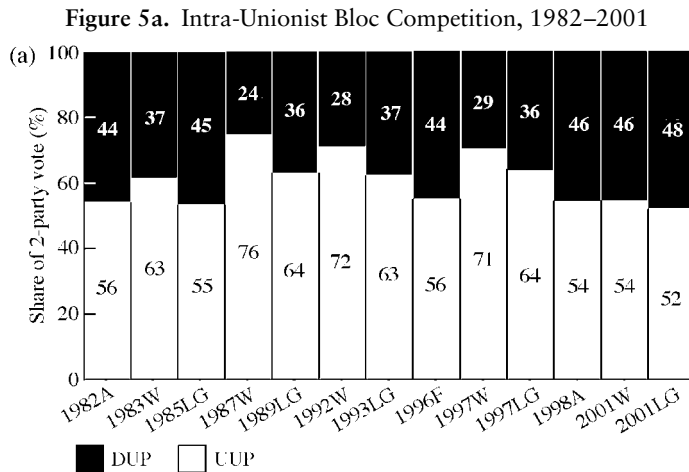
Figure 4. Vote Share in Northern Ireland Westminster Elections (%)



Source: The authors.

rise, its rate of growth slowed appreciably as the ‘peace process’ continued, with most nationalist gains going to Sinn Féin. For example (see Figure 2), the SDLP vote in 1997 was only a very modest 0.6% increase on its 1992 Westminster performance. Over the same time period Sinn Féin’s vote jumped by 6.1% to a total of 16.1% in 1997 (a growth rate ten times higher than the SDLP!). Sinn Féin’s accelerated growth continued in 2001 with a further gain of 5.6% to a new total of 21.7% (a 35% increase on its 1997 vote), thus capturing the long sought symbolic prize of becoming the largest nationalist party. Sinn Féin has gone from being an abstentionist party, as it was before 1982, to being the largest nationalist party today and probably the party with the greatest share of young voters, in less than 20 years. The answer to the question ‘Who has benefited electorally from the peace process and Belfast Agreement?’ could not be clearer.

Attempts to resolve protracted ethno-national conflicts tend not to be universally popular — if they were that would constitute proof that the conflict was not ‘deep’ or ‘protracted’. Thus, while Sinn Féin has captured most of the electoral gains from nationalist enthusiasm for a long overdue process of institutional and policy change, the DUP appears to have ridden the tiger of opposition to these same changes. ‘Just saying no’ to compromises with one’s inter-ethnic rivals has always been a successful strategy in such polarised party systems, but the DUP on this occasion cleverly combined its oppositional stance with partial cooperation with the new devolved governing arrangements, which are



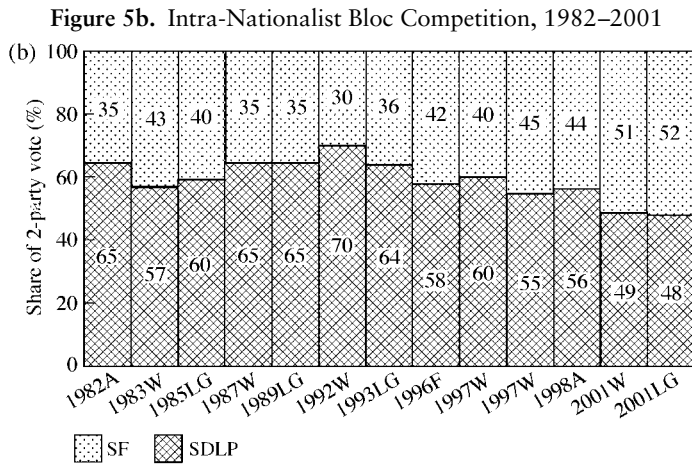
Source: The authors.

locally popular. With the UUP virtually as divided over the Agreement as the UK Conservative party under John Major was over European integration, many UUP voters decamped to the DUP. Nevertheless, the DUP's leap of 8.9% (a 65% increase in on its 1997 vote) was much further than optimistic DUP members could have hoped for.

It has long been noted that Northern Ireland has a dual party system. It is only a mild exaggeration to say that each community holds its own election to decide who will be its pre-eminent tribunes. Winning seats from the other communal bloc, which rarely happens, is a bonus; the more serious party competition usually takes place within each segmented community. Party politics in such systems tends to be characterised by ethnic outbidding among rival parties within each bloc. Figure 5 provides a graphic representation of the changing fortunes of the principal combatants in both halves of the dual party system. It is quite clear that opposition to the peace process has been a powerful electoral weapon for the DUP, which has now almost managed to draw level with the UUP, even in Westminster elections.

As Figure 5 demonstrates a rough ratio of 60:40 in favour of the SDLP in 1996/97 has now been replaced by Sinn Féin emerging as marginally the largest nationalist party in both of the elections held on the same day in 2001. The local government elections, held as usual by single transferable vote, resulted in broadly similar but of course more proportional results (Table 1).¹⁸ The aggregate patterns are very similar—but as yet we cannot analyse the data on 'transfers' as the official tabulations have yet to be published—and so we cannot tell whether there was any significant evidence of cross-ethnic voting in lower-order preferences.

While winning the percentage battle for votes is undoubtedly very



Source: The authors.

important, the seats of course are the actual jobs at stake. Northern Ireland voters, long accustomed to seeing about 17 of their 18 MPs returned in an election, struck a blow for a change in 2001, though their desired changes were often diametrically different. The net result however was that seven seats changed partisan control, and several other MPs survived narrowly. The UUP was the only major party to lose seats (the UKUP lost its single seat; this became the UUP's sole gain).¹⁹ The UUP lost five seats (net four); of these three were lost to the DUP (Strangford, East Londonderry and North Belfast) and two to Sinn Féin (West Tyrone and Fermanagh and South Tyrone). Thus, the DUP gained three seats, Sinn Féin gained two, and the SDLP held its existing three seats. Thus the final seat total was UUP (6), DUP (5), Sinn Féin (4) and SDLP (3). In 2001 three of the new MPs are women (17%). While hardly reaching Scandinavian levels of gender representation this is novel for Northern Ireland. No woman had been elected at any Northern Ireland Westminster election since Bernadette Devlin was returned in 1970.

If the 1998 Assembly results, held under STV (PR), are taken as a reasonably faithful reflection of overall ethno-national bloc divisions then the 2001 Westminster seat allocations were a much more faithful reflection of overall bloc divisions than was the previous Westminster contest in 1997. In other words, the 'appropriate' bloc won all of the seats in 2001, whereas in 1997 two 'nationalist constituencies' returned UUP MPs (Fermanagh and South Tyrone and West Tyrone). The other four seats that changed hands in 2001 were simply changes in the balance of power *within* the unionist bloc (three UUP losses to the DUP, marginally compensated by one UUP gain from the UKUP). In other words the 2001 Westminster results were more proportional with respect to parties *and* ethnic blocs than 1997. Indeed, it is worth

highlighting (see Table 1) that the disproportionality figure of 7.3 (on the least squares index) is by a massive margin the most proportional outcome of a Westminster election in Northern Ireland (the average for 1983–97 is 18.7). The decline of the UUP (and hence fall in its average seat bonus from a massive 23% in 1997 to only 6.5% in 2001) is the largest contributory factor.²⁰ This is not a commercial for the Westminster electoral system, which is highly inappropriate for the genuine multi-party system in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion and prospects

The election did not deliver David Trimble's desires. The IRA did not move on decommissioning and Trimble resigned as First Minister, though not as UUP party leader on 1 July. This provoked the sovereign governments into convening negotiations between pro-Agreement parties and themselves at Weston Park, Shropshire. A blame or blame-avoidance game began.

Observers agreed that two parties and one government shared most of the blame for the impasses implementing the Belfast Agreement and stabilising its institutions: Sinn Fein, the UUP and the UK government.

The IRA had initiated decommissioning of its weapons, if one counts international inspections of its arms dumps, but it had not moved to implement its pledge of 2000 to put its weapons completely and verifiably beyond use. None of its complaints about the UK government's failures to deliver on its pledges absolved Sinn Fein from its obligations to build confidence amongst its governmental partners that they were not sharing power with a party with a private army, and nothing in the Agreement warranted the republican line that actual decommissioning must be the very last act of implementation. Prevarication merely maximised distrust about the IRA's long-run intentions.

The UUP had broken several of its obligations under the Agreement, while demanding that others deliver on their promises ahead of time. It blocked rapid executive formation. It rejected the Patten report on policing, though it met the Agreement's terms of reference. The First Minister blocked Sinn Fein ministers' legitimate participation in the North-South Ministerial Council. He has twice threatened resignation, and the collapse or suspension of the Agreement's institutions, to force Sinn Fein to deliver the IRA to his deadlines. He encouraged the UK government to make the first formal break with the Agreement, and international law, by-passing the Suspension Actin 2000, which Secretary of State Peter Mandelson used, and Trimble has continued to press for its use.

The UK government so far has dishonoured its pledge of May 2000, repeated in March 2001, to produce legislation and implementation plans fully reflecting the letter and the spirit of the Patten report on policing—which had flowed squarely from the Agreement. None of its excuses exonerate it in nationalist eyes, and it also has work to do to

fulfil its obligations on demilitarisation, the review of the administration of justice and the protection of human rights.

At Weston Park the two governments sought to put together a package deal linking police reform, demilitarisation, decommissioning, and securing the Agreement's institutions. The talks were not successful in producing agreement, though they were not fruitless. The governments have currently agreed to organise and implement their own package. They will then have three choices: to leave further negotiation to the parties; to suspend the Agreement's institutions; or to have fresh Assembly elections. The first does not seem likely to work. The second option must be rejected by the Irish government, which regards the Suspension Act as a unilateral breach of a treaty. There is speculation about a variation on this option, viz. suspension for a day, followed by another six weeks for renewed negotiations before elections would have to occur. This option is unlikely to endear itself to nationalists and republicans. The third option is to have fresh Assembly elections, consequent upon the failure to re-elect successors to David Trimble and Seamus Mallon. The argument against elections is that they will help the DUP and Sinn Féin. Perhaps that possibility will act as an incentive for the UUP to compromise. But our analysis suggests that in any fresh Assembly elections the DUP and Sinn Féin would do best on moderated platforms. We might anticipate IRA initiatives on arms, and DUP 'renegotiation' briefings. And the emergence of both parties as the clear majority within their blocs would create a fascinating if dangerous spectacle. The two parties would have to choose: accept their respective nominees for the posts of First and Deputy First Ministers, accept moderate SDLP and UUP nominees for these posts, or have fresh elections. That is, they would have to choose between stealing their opponents' clothes and wearing them, or showing that they remain wolves in sheep's clothing.

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- 1 See, inter alia, D. McKittrick, *The Nervous Peace*, Blackstaff Press, 1996; B. O'Leary, 'The Conservative Stewardship of Northern Ireland 1979–97: Sound-Bottomed Contradictions or Slow Learning?', 45 *Political Studies* 4, 1997; B. O'Leary, 'The Belfast Agreement and the Labour Government: How to Handle and Mishandle History's Hand' in A. Seldon (ed.), *The Blair Effect: The Blair Government, 1997–2001*, Little Brown, 2001.
- 2 See P. Mitchell, 'Transcending an Ethnic Party System? The Impact of Consociational Governance on Electoral Dynamics and the Party System' by R. Wilford (ed.), Oxford University Press, 2001, and B. O'Leary 'The Nature of the Agreement', 22 *Fordham Journal of International Law* 4, 1999, or 'The Nature of the British-Irish Agreement', *New Left Review* 233, January–February.
- 3 It is tempting to say that the DUP has gone from being 'Ulster Says No', to 'Ulster says No to this, maybe yes to that, but don't tell anyone!'
- 4 See B. O'Leary and G. Evans, 'Northern Ireland: La Fin de Siècle, The Twilight of the Second Protestant Ascendancy and Sinn Féin's Second Coming', *Parliamentary Affairs*, October 1997.
- 5 For arguments favouring proportional electoral systems for Northern Ireland for Westminster elections see B. O'Leary, 'The Protection of Human Rights under the Belfast Agreement', 72 *Political Quarterly*

- 3, July–September 2001; B. O’Leary ‘The Implications for Political Accommodation in Northern Ireland of Reforming the Electoral System for the Westminster Parliament’, 35 *Representation* 2–3, 1999.
- 6 The First and Deputy First Ministers are equal in powers and functions, and differ solely in their titles. They are elected jointly by a concurrent majority of registered nationalists and unionists in the Assembly – and the death or resignation of one immediately triggers the other’s loss of office, and fresh elections within six weeks.
- 7 P. Mitchell, ‘Conflict Regulation and Party Competition in Northern Ireland’, 20 *European Journal of Political Research* 1, 1991; P. Mitchell, ‘Party Competition in an Ethnic Dual Party System’, 18 *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 4, 1995.
- 8 Here the DUP decided not to stand for fear of fragmenting the unionist vote – instead it backed and campaigned for a local anti-Agreement candidate, Mr Jim Dixon.
- 9 See P. Mitchell, ‘The Party System and Party Competition’ in P. Mitchell and R. Wilford (eds), *Politics in Northern Ireland*, Westview, 1999.
- 10 The figures are a slight adjustment to the well-known Pederson volatility index. Although often all parties are included in the count, this can lead to a distorted impression of partisan change if there is a high frequency of small party emergence, splits and fusions. Since small ‘parties’ are frequent vehicles in Northern Ireland they have been excluded in these calculations. We thus have a comparison from 1987–2001 of aggregate partisan vote change among the five main parties. These are the only parties with even a remote chance of winning a Westminster seat (leaving aside the unusual case of North Down which has elected – effectively – independent members). Also among them these five parties accounted for 95.6% of the votes cast in 2001.
- 11 The European figures are M. Gallagher, M. Laver and P. Mair, *Representative Government in Modern Europe*, McGraw Hill, 2001, p. 263.
- 12 In 1987 only two seats changed partisan control, in 1992 one seat, and in 1997 two.
- 13 O’Leary and Evans, op. cit.
- 14 P. Mitchell, ‘Transcending an Ethnic Party System? The Impact of Consociational Governance on Electoral Dynamics and the Party System’ in R. Wilford (ed.), *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*. Oxford University Press, 2001.
- 15 The only purpose of Table 2 is to provide an approximate guide to differential turnout in the absence of more direct information. No other assertions are being made here. In total, sixteen of the eighteen constituencies can easily be distinguished on this basis.
- 16 The combined APNI vote in 1997 in the seven constituencies *not* contested in 2001 was 16,073. If this had been repeated in 2001 it would have constituted 1.985 of the total votes cast. It cannot be assumed that all of these potential Alliance votes were cast for the U bloc instead, but most of these ‘missing Alliance’ party votes were accumulated in three predominantly unionist constituencies in 1997 (North Down, 7,553; North Belfast, 2,221; and Upper Bann, 3,017, which incidentally is much more than David Trimble’s margin of victory in 2001. Exactly 80% of these ‘missing Alliance’ votes were cast in 1997 in these three constituencies. Assuming that a small simulation can be excused (purely for fun): if Alliance had fielded candidates in these three constituencies in 2001 and achieved its 1997 level of support and if, as seems likely, these votes would have been ‘reclaimed’ from the U bloc, they would have constituted exactly 1.58% of the total vote in 2001. And recall that the U bloc’s improved position in 2001 was a gain of 1.6%. Thus, the suggestion is that with Alliance party competition in 2001 the total vote of the U bloc would have been approximately 50.5%, i.e. unchanged from 1997.
- 17 It should be noted that the recent growth of the much smaller unionist parties (the UKUP, PUP, UDP, and Northern Ireland Conservatives) is over. At their high point they had collectively taken 8.3% of the vote in the 1998 Assembly elections; in 2001 they managed only 2.8% in the Westminster election and 2.6% in the district council elections. Indeed, in an extraordinary example of organisational disarray the UDP failed to register in time for the 2001 elections – its leaders could stand only as independents.
- 18 For a good account of the 2001 local elections see K. Totten, ‘“Two Elections, One Day. Simple but Important”: The Northern Ireland District Council Elections 2001’, *Irish Political Studies*, 16, forthcoming.
- 19 David Burnside’s victory over William McCrea of the DUP in South Antrim was a second UUP victory, though it did not count as a gain in relation to 1997. This former UUP seat had been won by McCrea in a by-election.
- 20 Sinn Féin’s modest 0.5% seat bonus is the first ever positive figure for the party across all elections types and systems. For example, their average Westminster ‘bonus’ (1983–97 is –7%).