

# The myth of polarisation in Northern Ireland: rethinking claims that instability is due to increased polarisation caused by power-sharing



*[Matthew Whiting](#) and [Stefan Bauchowitz](#) argue that the assumption that power-sharing entrenches polarisation is not the reality that many think it is. By examining legislator voting records, speeches by party leaders, manifestos and public opinion data, they find that overall polarisation declined. They suggest that instability is instead caused by parties in Northern Ireland being encouraged by Westminster to adopt positions of brinkmanship as electoral strategies.*

In January 2020, the Northern Ireland Assembly restarted after a three-year collapse. The reopening was a subdued affair and took place more with trepidation than fanfare. This, of course, was not the Assembly's first collapse. It had already been suspended on four occasions (once for 3 months, twice for 24 hours, and once for five years) since it was established as part of the [Belfast Agreement](#) peace deal in 1998.

The most recent collapse ostensibly occurred over the [DUP's role in a shockingly badly managed renewable energy scheme](#), but it was also grounded in a long-standing cultural conflict between Sinn Féin and the DUP. The DUP were also refusing to pass an Irish language act because, in the [words of First Minister Arlene Foster](#), 'if you feed the crocodile it will keep coming back for more'. This came on top of other divisions, including: localised rioting over flags and parades; stalemate over how to deal with the legacy of the conflict; and, of course, Brexit where [88% of nationalists voted 'Remain' compared to 34% of unionists](#).

For many, this political instability is an ugly reminder that Northern Ireland remains polarised despite the successes of the peace process. In fact, according to some critics the peace deal may even have fed into this polarisation. They argue that while the peace process eliminated violence by offering Sinn Féin a share of power, power-sharing actually encourages leaders to neglect bread-and-butter issues in favour of entrenched ethnic politics so they can win as many votes from their community as possible.

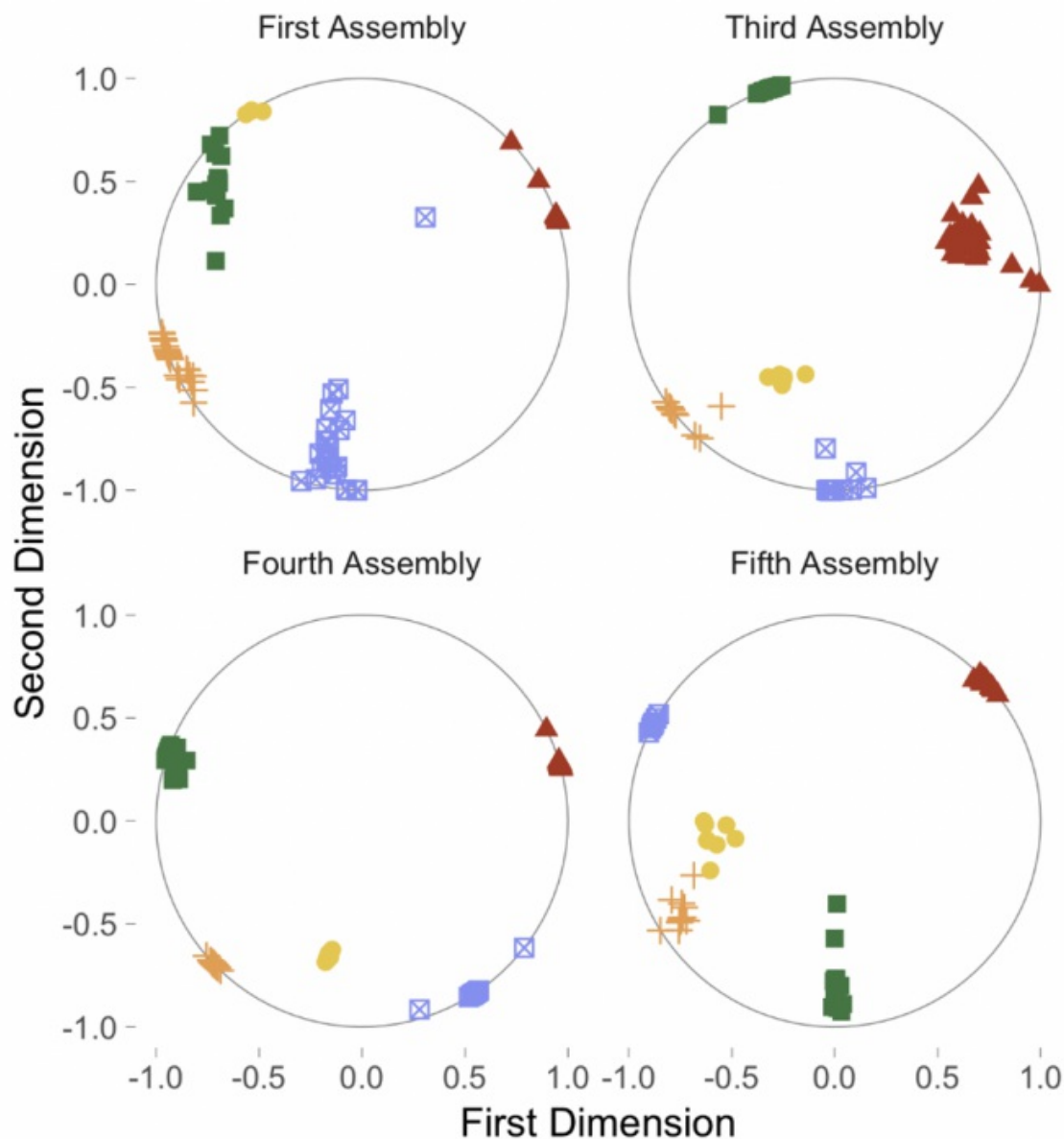
## Confronting the myth of polarisation

Confronted with this picture, [we set out to measure](#) whether Northern Ireland was really polarised or not, how rates of polarisation may have changed since between 1998 and today, and what policy areas might be more polarised than others.

First, we examined if Northern Ireland's politics was exclusively about identity issues and the peace process or if other issues emerged. We found that the Northern Irish experience actually defies claims that power-sharing entrenches identity politics at the expense of 'bread-and-butter' issues. We reviewed all votes in the Assembly between 1998-2018 and reviewed the Assembly election manifestos of the five biggest parties for the same time period. We found that identity and cultural politics never actually made up more than a third of issues and it was usually closer to 20-25%. Instead, issues related to the economy and the welfare state were given much more emphasis.

Secondly, we explored to what extent politicians were polarised and in what policy areas only to find that the Assembly was only polarised once and this was actually when it functioned best. We examined every vote in the Assembly from 1998-2018 (but we could not examine the second Assembly from 2002-2007 as there was only eight votes before it was suspended). By looking at how MLAs voted, we placed them in a two-dimensional space to see how far apart they were from other MLAs of their own party and how far apart they were from MLAs of other parties. In the Westminster system, these two dimensions would probably be an economic left-right and a socially liberal-socially conservative left-right. However, in Northern Ireland the main dimension is most likely a nationalist-unionist one and the second weaker dimension is most likely an aggregate economic and social left-right.

**Figure 1:** The policy positions of MLAs in the 1<sup>st</sup> (1998-02), 3<sup>rd</sup> (2007-11), 4<sup>th</sup> (2011-16) and 5<sup>th</sup> (2016-20)

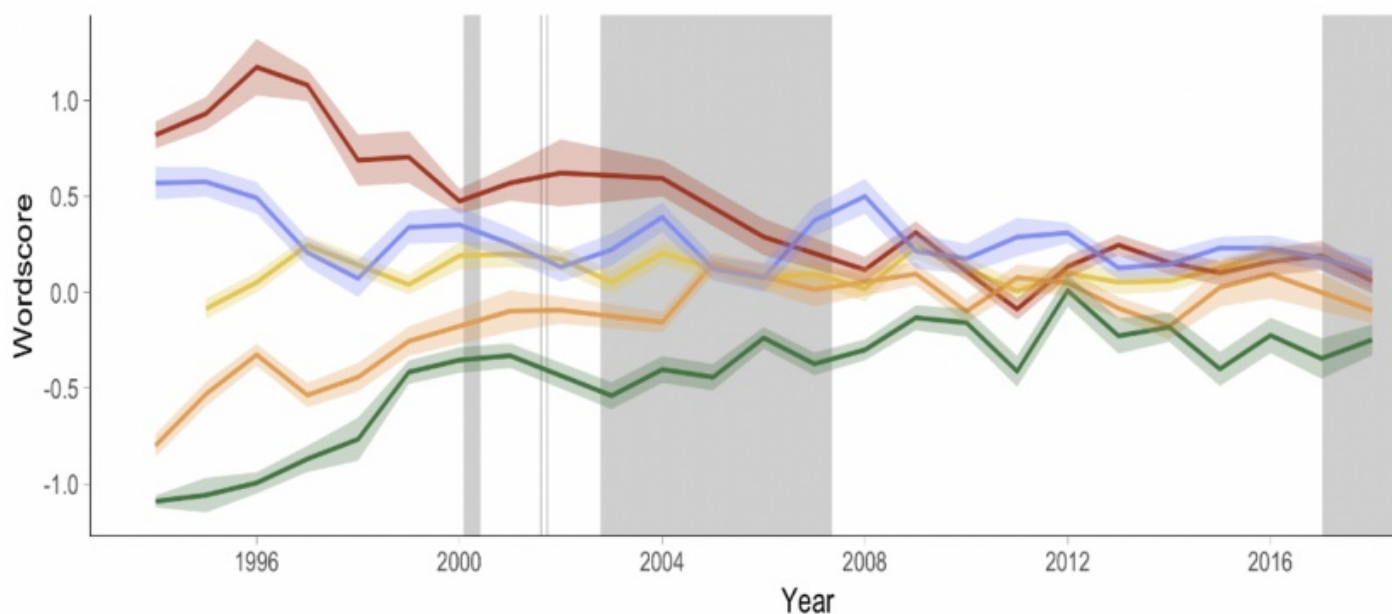


Each symbol represents the position of one MLA. We are particularly interested in the DUP (triangles) and Sinn Féin (squares). In a highly polarised system, you would expect all members of the same party to be very tightly bunched together and for the parties to be as far away from each other as possible. Looking at the most important first dimension, MLAs were only polarised during the fourth Assembly (2011-16). Yet this was the most productive of all Assemblies when the DUP came in from the cold, when Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley were labelled the [Chuckle Brothers](#), and when the Assembly passed the most legislation in its 20-year history. What is more, the fifth Assembly (2016-17) was when MLAs were least polarised but this was also when it collapsed for three years.

We also examined manifestos to see how far apart parties were in different policy areas. We found that when it came to economic issues, the welfare state, and the peace process, there was no polarisation. Instead, parties converged on a left-of-centre position and on supporting the peace process (especially after 2007). There was some polarisation over whether Northern Ireland should remain in the UK or not and on other identity issues. But these were of very low salience and hardly mentioned at all.

We also looked at leaders' speeches to their annual conference to see if they ramped up their positions when talking to grassroots supporters. However, again we found a pattern of convergence and no polarisation. There were moments where parties pulled further apart from each other, but these were temporary before returning to a stronger pattern of convergence.

**Figure 2:** The changing policy position of party leaders' speeches over time to annual conference (nationalist position while +1 is a hard-line unionist position). The shaded parts are times when suspended.



Finally, we looked at mass attitudes and behaviour and again we found no evidence of polarisation. When it came to economic policies, the people of Northern Ireland converged on a left-of-centre position. There was not even any mass polarisation when it came to controversial issues like the display of murals and flags by other communities. There was also a dramatic decline in the number of sectarian crimes over the 20-year period. Of course, Catholics remain far more likely to identify as Irish nationalists and Protestants as British unionists, but there was a large rise in those who identify with neither community and a rise in issues that cut across the sectarian divide (such as LGBT+ issues, abortion rights, and the environment).

### If it is not polarisation, why is Northern Ireland sometimes unstable?

While we found no polarisation in the sense that critics would predict, there can be no denying that the Assembly has been suspended four times, it collapsed as recently as January 2017, and Northern Ireland struggles to deal with its past. So if it is not down to polarisation, what explains this?

We suggest that the parties in Northern Ireland adopt positions of brinkmanship as electoral strategies and they are encouraged to do so because Westminster creates a moral hazard for this. In the crowded electoral space of post-conflict Northern Ireland, and with rigid block voting, electoral differentiation became the key to success. Under these conditions, Sinn Féin and the DUP made clear commitments to the peace process, but also [played up their historically hardline](#) images to gain votes over their moderate rivals.

As self-described guarantors of the peace process, the British role has largely been to oversee it from a distance. However, any time the peace process looked in jeopardy, successive governments under Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron granted political or financial support (often at the urging of the government in Dublin and local parties). After signing a confidence and supply agreement with Theresa May, the DUP were further emboldened that they could extract concessions from Westminster as needed. This meant that the local parties could engage in brinkmanship knowing they would not necessarily pay the price for their actions and that a safety net of concessions was usually available. In other words, pushing the system to the point of collapse was strategic rather than down to ideological polarisation.

Northern Ireland may be unstable at times, but we should rethink claims that this is because of increased polarisation caused by power-sharing.

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Note: the above draws on the authors' published work in [Political Studies](#).

### About the Authors



**Matthew Whiting** is a Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the University of Birmingham.



**Stefan Bauchowitz** works as an advisor in 'Governance and Conflict' division at GIZ, a German development agency.