

One step closer to a united Ireland? Explaining Sinn Féin's electoral success

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For the first time, unionist parties do not hold an overall majority in Northern Ireland following the recent election. But although the result confirms that Sinn Féin has transformed into an electoral force, is advancing a united Ireland still central to its agenda? [Matthew Whiting](#) writes that the promise of a united Ireland looks more like a victim of Sinn Féin's success than the next step in their ever conquering rise.

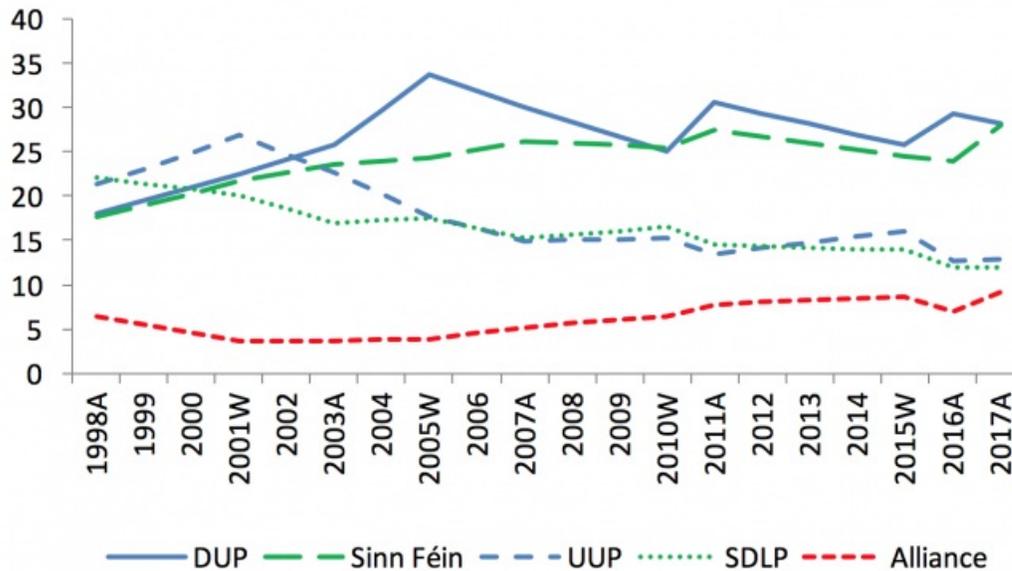


Twenty years ago, Irish republicans took the gamble that they were [more likely to achieve their goals](#) through peaceful elections than violence. This decision did not entail Sinn Féin changing its ultimate goal of a united Ireland, but rather it represented an adaptation of tactics to achieve this goal. This raises the question of whether the recent election results for the Northern Irish Assembly represent a vindication of republicanism's electoral gamble and, given the strong results for Sinn Féin, whether Ireland is one step closer on a gradual path to reunification.

Clearly, the election results will have made the *bodhrán* that sounds the heartbeat of Irish nationalism thump a little louder and faster. Sinn Féin now hold 27 seats compared to the DUP's 28 seats (in 2016 the DUP held 38 seats compared to Sinn Féin's 28 seats) – a steep loss given the DUP only shed 1.1 per cent of its vote share. But reducing every constituency from 6 to 5 seats in a bid to create a smaller Assembly cost the DUP more than other parties.

The UUP secured 10 seats, losing 6 seats despite largely keeping its vote share the same, while the SDLP retained all of its 12 seats. This now means that the combined seat share of Unionist parties (38 seats) is smaller than that of nationalist parties (39 seats). Meanwhile the Alliance Party, which attempts to sit outside the unionist/nationalist divide, fared well, retaining its 8 seats and increasing its vote share. Significantly, almost 70 per cent of voters supported a party that endorsed 'remain' in the Brexit referendum, perhaps signalling a coming headache for Theresa May.

The vote share (%) of the major parties since the endorsement of the 1998 Belfast Agreement peace deal



Note: The years where elections were held are marked either ‘A’ for an Assembly election or ‘W’ for a Westminster general election. Assembly elections are based on percentage of first preference votes in STV elections.

If Sinn Féin’s transformation is judged by its ability to become an electoral force, undoubtedly this election is a great success. In a conversation I had last year with a leading SDLP official, they rather cynically declared that achieving a united Ireland does not actually matter to Sinn Féin as long as it does not hurt their vote share. But I’m not so sure this is true – at some point, to retain their credibility and to meet demands of grassroots supporters, they will need to deliver on their united Ireland rhetoric and show some tangible gains. The party has long argued that many of the ills facing (Northern) Irish society stem from an illegitimate colonisation that needs to be undone, and that true democracy can only be realised in Ireland when its people have full self-determination.

When I interviewed Matt Carthy recently, an impressive member of the ‘new guard’ of Sinn Féin and head of the party’s Uniting Ireland strategy, he made it clear that advancing a united Ireland remains central to the party’s medium-term goals. The strategy to achieve this is to open up a dialogue with unionism and seek to persuade key groups in Dublin, London, and Belfast that this is the best way forward for all of Ireland’s inhabitants.

When assessed against the criteria of advancing a united Ireland, the 2017 election results do not look quite so rosy for Sinn Féin. In this campaign, the desire for a united Ireland featured very little. It came up indirectly at times when politicians argued about not wanting to be ruled from London, but this is very different from calling for a united Ireland. Instead, much of the electoral campaign was about making a judgment on the competence of the rulers of the Northern Ireland Assembly, especially Arlene Foster’s role in the [Renewable Heat Incentive scheme scandal](#).

This is not to say that voters in Northern Ireland are free-floating and untethered from any ethno-nationalist cleavage (typically, over 90 per cent of Catholics vote for nationalist parties and even more Protestants vote for unionist parties). But today’s Northern Irish voters (especially younger ones) think in terms of capability and competence to promote prosperity and welfare. From this perspective, it appears that the Assembly election was more about bedding-down better functioning Northern Irish institutions than moving closer to all-Ireland ones.

Additionally, the DUP’s decline does not actually represent an endorsement of the competing vision of Sinn Féin. Instead, it is more about the DUP misreading the unionist electorate and Sinn Féin being better at energising its base to turnout. The DUP suffered because it appears to be increasingly out of step with the Northern Irish

electorate. It was the only major party to back Brexit in a territory that voted 56 per cent to remain. It also continues to argue against gay marriage and abortion on the basis of religious belief, despite the strikingly secular and modern feel of Belfast, Derry and most other towns throughout Northern Ireland.

To the extent that Sinn Féin's vote share increased, this was not necessarily because its manifesto is winning over new voters who see austerity, Brexit, and civil rights best protected within a united Ireland framework. Instead it was most likely as a result of higher turnout and successfully getting traditional supporters to bother to vote.

The gap between moderate unionism and Sinn Féin still remains vast, and securing this community's consent will be necessary to move closer to a united Ireland. Indeed, Mike Nesbitt, the leader of the UUP who resigned in the wake of his party's poor performance, declared he would transfer his vote to the SDLP. This was too radical for many unionist supporters who rounded on him for transferring to any nationalist party, even one without the radical legacy of Sinn Féin.

Although the two Unionist parties have now lost a majority in the Assembly, the Alliance Party is currently committed to retaining the Union and creating a federal UK. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a vote for Sinn Féin simply cannot be equated with a vote for a united Ireland – [opinion polls](#) tell us that Catholic voters in Northern Ireland are less committed to a United Ireland than Protestant voters are to remaining in the UK. Competent devolved government trumps changing constitutional status quo.

So what now for Northern Ireland? The parties have three weeks to kickstart the process of consenting to form a government using d'Hondt rules for allocating ministerial portfolios. This looks decidedly tricky given that the issues that led to the Assembly's collapse in the first place are yet to be resolved. This will be a tough job given that Arlene Foster's position is damaged within her party, while Sinn Féin's leader, Michelle O'Neill, has not actually served as deputy First Minister yet.

But recent history might have some sage advice for James Brokenshire, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I previously interviewed Peter Hain, the Secretary of State who first struck a deal to bring the DUP and Sinn Féin together in government in 2006/7, after years of stalemate. Hain threatened Northern Irish politicians with cuts to their budgets and wages, and greater intervention from Westminster unless they agreed a deal. It worked!

One thing the DUP and Sinn Féin have in common is that both want devolved rule (albeit the DUP will not have this at any cost and Sinn Féin only want it temporarily before transitioning to a united Ireland) and supporters of both parties clearly want competent, not petulant, leaders. Votes and money are always good ways to focus politicians' minds and this may be the best leverage Brokenshire has in the next three weeks.

For Sinn Féin meanwhile, the message is mixed. Their new leader, Michelle O'Neill, while being from a staunchly republican family, has played very well with her electorate, reinforcing the decision to reject armed struggle. The party also continues to do well in the Republic of Ireland, building its desired all-Ireland dynamic. Competence and working within the ruling institutions has been the basis on which Sinn Féin built its vote share, not aspirations for a new constitutional settlement.

Electoral success requires compromise in hardline goals (as the history of socialist and Christian Democratic parties throughout Europe tells us) and Sinn Féin's goal of a united Ireland sometimes looks like a victim of their success rather than the next step in their ever conquering rise. The 2017 Assembly Election confirms this trend.

About the Author

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