

Northern Ireland is suddenly relevant for Westminster elections and Westminster is relevant for Northern Ireland

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What happens in the 18 constituencies of Northern Ireland next May could well be of profound importance both for the outcome at Westminster and for the stability of Northern Ireland. In past elections, MPs from Northern Ireland have been largely irrelevant to the legislative arithmetic of government formation in Westminster. However, in 2015, as [Matthew Whiting](#) shows in this post, the fragmentation of the Conservative and Labour vote means that Northern Irish MPs may play a crucial role in deciding which parties govern.



It may not sound surprising that Northern Irish constituencies matter in predicting the overall election outcome, but in fact historically this has not really been the case. The only of the major parties to organise and compete in elections to Northern Ireland was the Conservative Party, with both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats refusing to do so. What is more, the Conservative Party did not enter elections until 1989 and it has always performed poorly in the region, with their highest ever vote share across the region under 6 percent in the 1992 Westminster election. Northern Ireland, even at the height of the Troubles, has always been of low electoral salience for voters in British elections and it is rarely mentioned by candidates or in election manifestos. There have been some notable exceptions to this general trend of the irrelevance of (Northern) Ireland for the governing parties of Westminster. The Irish Parliamentary Party held the balance of power in Westminster on occasions at the end of the 19th century. More recently, John Major's government came to rely on support from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) for some crucial votes following by-election defeats which eroded his Conservative Party's slim majority and when faced with potential rebels. And in the 2010 general election, the Northern Irish branch of The Conservative Party (who we should not forget actually have the official name of The Conservative and Unionist Party) struck an electoral alliance with the UUP to form the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists (UCU). However, this alliance failed to secure any seats and even caused some disquiet within the UUP, resulting in the abandonment of the pact in 2012.

These exceptions aside, Northern Ireland rarely plays any significant part in the outcomes of Westminster elections. Yet May 2015 may see all that change. The [predicted closeness of the polls](#) for Labour and the Conservatives, and the fact that neither party is currently predicted to be able to convert their plurality into a majority of seats, means that Northern Irish MPs may be influential in deciding the Westminster government in two possible ways. Firstly, potential MPs from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) (or the UUP if they manage to win any seats) may be crucial to keeping a Conservative government in power. Secondly, Sinn Féin, who refuse to take up seats they win in Westminster elections due to their long-standing policy of refusing to recognise the legitimacy of British rule in Northern Ireland, potentially lower the threshold required for a majority or to make a minority government stable. In 2010, Sinn Féin won five seats, lowering the threshold needed for a majority from 326 to 323. Indeed, one of the possible ironies of the 2015 election may well be that Sinn Féin and SNP successes enable the Conservative Party to retain power – a party that has long played the role of a pantomime villain for of Celtic nationalists.

Knowing the extent to which Northern Ireland's electoral results will play a role in deciding the ultimate Westminster government is very tough to predict. There were a number of close seats at the 2010 election and a number of local complexities, which combine to make it difficult to predict how things will play out in May 2015. For example, Belfast East which is currently held by the Alliance Party is traditionally a unionist stronghold and was held by the DUP leader, Peter Robinson, until the 2010 election when he lost the seat due to becoming embroiled in some high profile scandals. But with such a slim majority it will be hard for the Alliance Party to retain this seat. Belfast North is a rare seat where all four of the major parties perform very well and although currently held by the DUP, the momentum is with Sinn Féin in this constituency. Fermanagh and South Tyrone was the closest result in the whole of the UK and

Sinn Fein won the seat by only 4 votes in a constituency that is no stranger to sectarian tension and controversy (most notably, it was the seat won by the IRA hunger striking prisoner [Bobby Sands](#) in a 1981 by-election). Other results could also change with the end of the UUP and Conservative Party pact which seemed to stand neither in good stead, such as in South Antrim. All this is even more difficult to predict given the total absence of regular polling data for Northern Ireland as a whole, let alone constituency level polls, but it is encouraging that [some forecasters](#) are now including Northern Ireland in their 2015 predictions.

Party	No of Current MPs	Vote Share
DUP	8	25.0
Sinn Féin	5	25.5
SDLP	3	16.5
Alliance	1	6.3
UCU	0	15.2
Independent (unionist)	1	–

Not only may the decisions of Northern Ireland impact upon the Westminster government, but the make-up of the Westminster government may impact upon party behaviour in Northern Ireland in a way that is relatively unique too. One of the most important dimensions to securing the consent of nationalist parties, especially Sinn Féin, for a peace process was that since 1973 successive British governments consistently presented themselves as relatively neutral brokers whose over-riding interest was to eradicate violence and enact whatever policy was the democratic will of the majority of its inhabitants. Famously, Peter Brooke, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, declared in 1990 that Britain had 'no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland'. One of the key factors that persuaded Sinn Féin to give up violence was their acceptance of the idea that Britain was not intent on holding onto Northern Ireland at all costs. This reassured Sinn Féin that they could pursue their goal of united Ireland through the peaceful politics of persuasion and that Westminster would even facilitate secession if it was the majority will of the people.

But if the Conservative Party in 2015 form some sort of government that is reliant on the support of unionist politicians, this will undermine the ability of the British government to claim neutrality. This might not seem of much importance given that the peace process was accepted in 1998 with the Belfast Agreement and further consolidated with the St Andrews Agreement in 2006. But some contentious issues remain which continue to destabilise politics in the province. Most notably, debates over the public display of flags and parades are highly problematic. Previous attempts to broker an agreement on this issue at the start of 2014 by Richard Haass, an American diplomat, ended in [his abandoning the process in protest at unionist intransigence](#). Theresa Villiers, the Conservative Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, is currently chairing a new round of talks building on Haass's proposals along with counterparts in the Irish government. Such efforts will find it much harder to extract Sinn Féin's support if they are seen to be overly receptive to unionist interests as a result of the Conservative Party's need to appease their new-found unionist allies.

Rarely in recent memory has Northern Ireland potentially wielded such disproportionate influence over Westminster politics. The Conservative Party may need to think carefully before pursuing their short-term electoral interests, which may come at the cost of brokering a long-needed agreement on how to deal with ongoing community tensions in Northern Ireland.

About the Author

Matthew Whiting completed his PhD at the LSE where he examined the moderation of Sinn Féin and the IRA. He is currently a Lecturer in British and Comparative Politics at the University of Kent. His research interests are around British party politics, state responses to violent separatism, and constitutional designs to regulate conflict.



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