

## **The realignment of unionism: the shift in Orange Order support from the Ulster Unionist Party to the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland**

### **Devolution Briefings**

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#### **Key points**

- There has been a sharp swing in support among Unionist voters from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) to the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) at elections since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement
- This switch in allegiance has also occurred amongst members of the Protestant Orange Order, despite the Order's century old formal link to the UUP
- The formal association between the Orange Order and the UUP was ended by the Order in March 2005. Severance reflected the shift in the Order's support.
- The key factors underpinning the shift in allegiance of Orange Order members appear to be a) opposition to the Good Friday Agreement – a deal which was opposed by the Order and the DUP, but supported by the UUP b) hostility to David Trimble, the UUP leader from 1995 until his resignation in 2005 and c) ideological proximity to the DUP
- Young Orange Order members are most likely to support the DUP.

#### **Context**

Since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, there has been a marked realignment within the Unionist electorate in Northern Ireland. The anti-Agreement DUP now leads the pro-Agreement UUP in terms of popular support in all four types of elections (see Table 1).

**Table 1 UUP-DUP electoral rivalry 1997-2005**

Election	% first preference vote	
	UUP	DUP
1997 General	32.7	13.1
1997 Local	27.8	15.6
1998 Assembly	21.3	18.1
1999 European	17.7	28.5
2001 General	26.8	22.5

2001 Local	23.0	21.5
2003 Assembly	22.7	25.7
2004 European	16.6	31.9
2005 General	17.7	33.7
2005 Local	18.0	29.6

The demise of the once-dominant UUP has been startling. The party was reduced to a single Westminster seat at the 2005 General Election, a result so poor that it precipitated the immediate resignation of the party leader, David Trimble. Sir Reg Empey was elected as Trimble's replacement in June 2005. The DUP did not mobilise extra Protestant voters where it mattered, as there was not a statistically significant pattern for the relationship between the DUP vote and turnout in unionist-held constituencies. Rather, the increase in DUP vote appeared to be accounted for by switches from UUP voters.

The swing to the DUP has been linked to the apparent collapse in Protestant confidence in the Good Friday Agreement. Amid rows over IRA decommissioning and continued paramilitary activity, devolved institutions were suspended indefinitely in October 2002. One BBC Northern Ireland poll in October 2002 suggested that Protestant support had fallen to one-third, compared to 57 per cent support in the Good Friday Agreement referendum in May 1998.

The UUP has been deserted by its long-standing allies within the Protestant Orange Order. The Order was instrumental in the creation of the UUP in 1905 and held formal voting rights within the party's ruling council. The Orange Order was associated with the traditionally moderate unionism of the UUP and with the conservative Protestantism of the Church of Ireland and Presbyterian Church. In contrast, the DUP was associated more with radical loyalism and was informally linked to the Free Presbyterian Church, due to the founding of that church by the party's leader, Ian Paisley

### **The changing political allegiance of Orange Order members**

The end of the century-old link between the Orange Order and the UUP appeared increasingly likely due to differences over the Good Friday Agreement. The Orange Order opposed the Agreement as a deal that 'no Protestant in good conscience could support' and became hostile to David Trimble's leadership of the party (*Orange Standard*, April 1998). Trimble's leadership came under frequent challenge and membership of the Orange Order was one of the most important variables in explaining support for, or opposition to, the UUP leader, Orange Order members being particularly hostile. Trimble spoke of the possibility of reviewing the relationship between the UUP and the Order. Ultimately, it was the Order that did the severing, cognisant of the shift in party allegiance votes of many of its members. Despite the voting shift to the DUP, Orange Order members were split almost equally on whether the Order should continue to exercise voting rights within the UUP.

Voting patterns and party loyalty within the Orange Order can be measured through the Orange Order membership survey conducted by the authors. 75.4% claim to

identify with a particular political party. Of these, a clear majority favour the DUP. The breakdown of party loyalties amongst these identifiers is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 Party identification among Orange Order members (2004) (%)**

DUP	55.5
UUP	42.2
Other	2.3

The DUP's lead over the UUP among Orange Order members is even greater when voting intentions are considered. Table 3 indicates the recent and intended voting patterns of members of the Order (the survey was completed in autumn 2004 prior to the 2005 general election and the 'if an election tomorrow' question might be regarded as a reasonable indicator of votes in that contest).

**Table 3 Previous and intended votes of Orange Order members (2004) (%)**

	DUP	UUP	Other	Did/would not vote
2001 General election	48.9	45.3	3.2	2.6
If an election tomorrow	64.9	29.2	3.4	2.5

Although split fairly evenly in 2001, the Orange Order electorate was already offering greater support to the DUP than the unionist population in its entirety. Unfortunately, there is no earlier data on Orange Order voting, but it is likely that a majority of members supported the UUP prior to the Good Friday Agreement. What is apparent is that support for the DUP has soared in recent years. On the voting intention question 'if an election tomorrow', the DUP does even better among Orange Order members than it did among the entire unionist population in the 2005 election, when the DUP outpolled its rival by almost two-to-one. The historic link between the UUP and the Orange Order has thus failed to staunch the flow of votes to the UUP's rival.

Moreover, the breakdown in Table 4 indicates that the shift to the DUP has occurred across all sections of the Orange Order.

**Table 4 Party choice of Orange Order members according to social characteristics**

	Party supported (%)			
	2001		2004	
	DUP	UUP	DUP	UUP
Manual worker	51.0	41.5	65.8	27.1
Self-ascribed middle class	42.9	54.8	57.8	40.0
Aged 55+	36.9	60.7	48.9	44.6
Gross annual income above £25,000	49.3	42.3	66.7	25.3
Live in Belfast or Londonderry city	56.5	39.1	75.0	16.7
No qualifications	50.0	46.8	56.1	36.4
Non-Church of Ireland	53.2	41.5	66.0	26.9

The section of the Orange Order most resistant to the call of the DUP is the over 55 age category, among whom the UUP enjoyed a substantial lead as late as 2001. This

category contains those members socialised during an era of fraternal relations between the UUP and the Orange Order who may value old allegiances.

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of lower preference Orange Order votes (only Westminster contests utilise first-past-the-post voting in Northern Ireland) remain within the Unionist bloc. However, 29.8% per cent of Orange voters graded the prospects of their rendering a lower preference vote for the UUP at 5 or below, on a scale where 0 equalled ‘absolutely no possibility’ and 10 represented ‘absolute certainty’ of such a vote. The 0-5 figure for the DUP was a mere 15.9%. The mean likelihood scale scores regarding lower preference voting were 8.4 for the DUP and 7.1 for the UUP.

### **Why the shift in allegiance?**

#### *The Good Friday Agreement*

A major factor underpinning the shift in Orange allegiance may be the different unionist party perspectives on the Good Friday Agreement. 33.4% of Orange Order members voted in favour of the deal in 1998, when it was backed by the UUP leadership, albeit against significant internal opposition. By late 2004, only 11.8% declared that they would vote yes to the Agreement in a new referendum.

The Good Friday Agreement provided a guide to the UUP-DUP faultline within the Orange Order. Of those members of the Order who voted ‘yes’ to the Agreement in 1998, 37.8% supported the DUP, a fairly high figure considering the DUP’s strident opposition to the deal. Of those voting no, 80.2% supported the DUP. In terms of those who would vote ‘yes’ if a similar referendum were to be held tomorrow, 23.5% support the DUP and 76.5% support the UUP.

The reasons given by Orange Order members for opposing the Good Friday Agreement chime with the remainder of the unionist population amid an imperfect, armed peace. The non-constitutional aspects, most notably the early release of paramilitary prisoners, troubled Orange Order members more than the constitutional features, as seen in Table 5. The prisoner releases were particularly disturbing to members given that only 5.2% believe that the IRA’s armed campaign is over.

**Table 5 Main reasons for rejection of the Good Friday Agreement by Orange Order members (2004)**

	% highlighting as a reason
Prisoner releases	70.0
Sinn Fein in government	68.9
Discriminates against Protestants	68.6
Changes to policing	59.4
Will lead to a united Ireland	58.0

That non-constitutional aspects of the Agreement are the most troubling for Orange Order is unsurprising, given the assertion of the ‘consent principle’ within the deal, by

which Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom for so long as the majority of its citizens so desire. Despite this clause, a majority of members of the Order still believe that the Agreement will somehow lead to a united Ireland.

Clearly, the DUP's denunciation of the Good Friday Agreement chimed with the majority of Orange electors, even if the DUP was powerless to reverse several of the aspects most unsavoury to this constituency. The Orange Order articulates the view that the Protestant community is under siege, from a variety of forces. A substantial number of members (61.5%) believe that a majority of Catholics sympathise with the IRA. Restrictions imposed upon Orange parades by the Parades Commission (a body established prior to the Good Friday Agreement) have also fuelled resentment. 87 % of members want the Commission scrapped, although a pragmatic wing is also evident, 31.2 % believing the Order should negotiate with the body pending abolition

#### *Leadership factors*

Another important factor in explaining the desertion of the UUP by Orange Order members may have been antipathy to the party leader. Immediately prior to his departure, Trimble had a 'popularity' rating closer to that of Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams than to Ian Paisley's, as Table 6 indicates.

**Table 6 Mean ratings of party leaders by Orange Order members (2004)**

Ian Paisley	7.32
David Trimble	3.47
Mark Durkan	1.82
Gerry Adams	0.19

0 = strongly dislike, 10 = strongly like

#### *Ideological factors*

If the transfer of Orange allegiances were due predominantly to hostility to Trimble, the UUP might take comfort that abandonment was merely temporary. However, our survey indicated that Orange Order members are more closely aligned to the DUP in terms of their loyalism and in terms of left-right placement (although it needs to be recognised that the two items can be conflated in Northern Ireland politics).

#### *Identifying the key variables of change*

A multivariate analysis is required to identify the most significant predictors of whether a member of the Order supports the DUP or UUP. This is reported elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Controlling for all structural, leadership and ideological factors, the most significant variables are:

- i) age - younger Orange Order members are much more likely to support the DUP
- ii) ideological distance from the UUP
- iii) support for Ian Paisley
- iv) hostility to David Trimble when he was UUP leader

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<sup>1</sup> Tonge, J., McAuley, J. and Evans, J. 'The Old Order collapses? Explaining the Shift in Orange Order support from the DUP to the UUP', Presented to the ESRC/University of Ulster Devolution and Unionism conference, 9 June 2005.

## **Conclusion**

Some within unionism welcome the disentanglement of the Orange Order from the UUP, believing it creates space for a more secular party to emerge. Others may question the importance of the Orange vote, given the reductions in size and influence of the Order. However, the shift in Orange alignment reflects a wider Protestant realignment to the DUP, a move unthinkable less than a decade ago. This change appears to be a direct consequence of Protestant discontent with the Good Friday Agreement and is most stark among younger members of the Orange Order, for whom the old UUP-Orange Order links appeared irrelevant. The DUP has proved itself adept at portraying itself as the safer custodian of Protestant and Unionist interests. The DUP may eventually negotiate a power sharing deal within the broad framework of the Good Friday Agreement. Moreover, over 70% of Orange Order members desire the restoration of a Northern Ireland Assembly and 63% regard it as 'very' or 'quite' likely. However, if the ideological realignment of the Orange Order towards the DUP is matched by the broader Protestant population, there appears little immediate prospect of a major transfer of votes back to the UUP.

*This Devolution briefing was written by Professor Jonathan Tonge of the European Studies Research Institute at the University of Salford and Professor James McAuley of the Division of Sociology at the University of Huddersfield. It draws on their survey of the Orange Order, conducted in autumn 2004. The pilot survey elicited 301 replies to 500 questionnaires, a response rate of 60 per cent. Professors Tonge and McAuley are grateful to Robert Saulters, Drew Nelson and David Hume at the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland for their cooperation with the project. The assistance of Dr Jocelyn Evans of the European Studies Research Institute at the University of Salford, is gratefully acknowledged. Findings from the survey were presented at an ESRC Devolution Programme conference at the University of Ulster in June 2005.*

**[USUAL END MATTER]**