

Findings from the Economic and Social Research Council's Research Programme on
Devolution and Constitutional Change

Devolution Briefings

The Changing Face of Unionism: Evidence from Public Attitude Surveys

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Key Points

- The DUP is now regarded as the most effective voice for unionist opinion in Northern Ireland.
- The shift in electoral support from the DUP to the UUP is associated with opposition to the Agreement, strength of unionist identity and resentment of police reforms.
- The shift in electoral support is also associated with the belief that the DUP has changed as a party and become more willing to compromise.
- The DUP support base has changed over the period from 1998 – 2003.
- There has been a doubling of support for power-sharing among the DUP voters of 2003 compared with the DUP voters of 1998.
- There is no clear choice for a future First Minister amongst DUP voters.

Context

The results of the Westminster and local government elections in Northern Ireland on 5th May 2005 were to prove disastrous for the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) but a triumph for its main political rival the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). In terms of the Westminster poll the extent of the damage inflicted on the UUP was clear. The party saw its number of MPs drop from six in 2001 to just one in 2005. In four of these seats the UUP lost out directly to the DUP whilst in South Belfast, the decision of the DUP to oppose the UUP led to a split in the unionist vote thereby allowing the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) candidate to win the seat. In contrast for the DUP the delight in seeing the number of its MPs rise from five in 2001 to nine in 2005 was capped by the party's candidate in Upper Bann defeating the sitting MP and then leader of the UUP, David Trimble. At local government level although the results may not have been so dramatic, the trend of results away from the UUP towards the DUP largely mirrored the Westminster poll. The UUP was to see its total of council seats fall from 154 in 2001 to 115 in 2005, a net loss of 39. Again by way of contrast the DUP was to emerge as the main winner with its total of council seats rising from 131 in 2001 to 182 in 2005, a net gain of 51. Even though there had been widespread predictions that the UUP would be under severe electoral pressure from the DUP on 5 May 2005 this did not lessen the extent of the shock when the size and scale of this finally emerged.

In seeking to add to the current debates around unionism and in particular the shift from the UUP to the DUP, survey data can begin to offer some explanation as to why such a trend has emerged. This briefing paper draws mainly on the survey funded by the ESRC as part of its Devolution and Constitutional Change programme and carried out through face-to-face interviews with a random sample of 1,000 respondents following the 2003 Assembly elections in Northern Ireland. At this point in time, the shift from the UUP to the DUP was only beginning to become apparent, nonetheless the survey data do provide some indications of the factors associated with this trend.

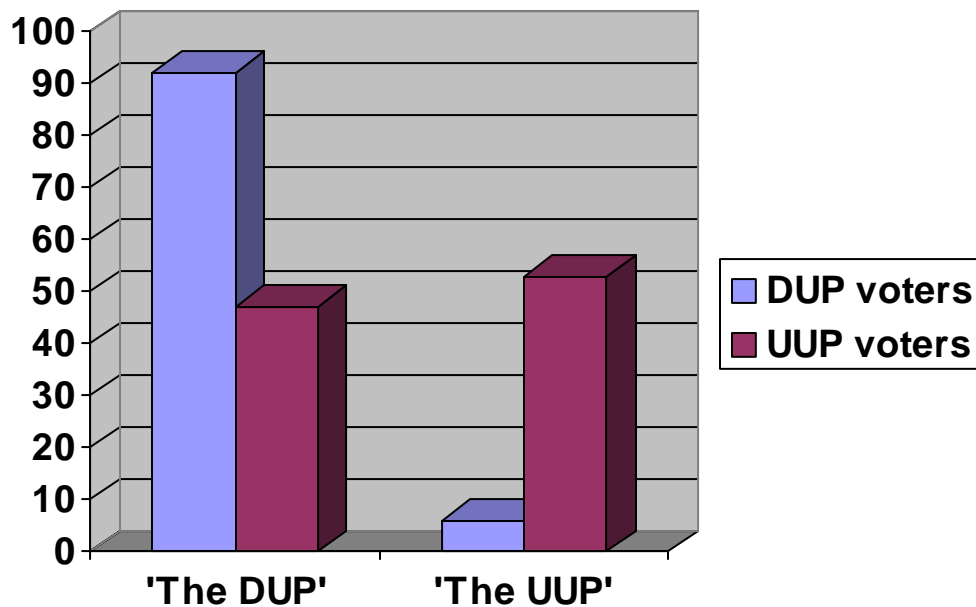
Commentary

The UUP and DUP have been engaged in a prolonged and a bitter political struggle to establish themselves as the most effective voice and representative of unionism in Northern Ireland since the introduction of Direct Rule from Westminster in 1972. Whilst the fortunes of both parties fluctuated, the UUP had traditionally remained the leading unionist party. However in the period since the referendum on the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in May 1998 the DUP has mounted a vigorous challenge to this perception. The extent of the progress made by the DUP on this front has been most evident recently in the election results of May 2005 when the party confirmed its position as the clear leader of unionism. The evidence of this change was first noted in the results of the Northern Ireland Assembly election in November 2003 and reinforced by the post-election survey. Respondents who had voted for the DUP or UUP in November 2003 were asked:

- *“Which party do you think has been the most effective voice for unionists in Northern Ireland?”*

Figure 1 shows the stark results. Of those who had actually voted DUP, an unsurprising 92% believed that the DUP was now the most effective voice to represent unionist opinion in Northern Ireland. In contrast however, the proportion of UUP voters who believed that the UUP was the most effective voice stood at 53%. In other words nearly half of Protestants who had voted UUP did so whilst reckoning that the DUP was a more effective voice for unionists. Given this evidence indicating the ‘softness’ of nearly half of those who had voted UUP in 2003 the election results of 2005 are easily explicable.

Figure 1. Perceptions of the ‘most effective voice for unionists’



Traditionally there have been a number of factors associated with voting for the DUP; supporters have tended to be younger, more likely to be working class and with fewer educational qualifications. However it is clearly of interest to see whether this pattern would hold up in 2003 given the obvious swelling of the DUP ranks with non-traditional party supporters. A logistic regression was constructed to model the factors that were independently important in predicting whether Protestants chose to vote DUP or UUP.

Table 1 shows that perceived social class (whether respondents considered themselves to be middle class or working class) emerges as important. Those Protestants who saw themselves as working class were significantly more likely to vote DUP than UUP, as were younger respondents. However, it is interesting that the level of educational qualification did not emerge as a significant predictor.

On the 'issues' the results are more than a little interesting. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the most important predictor of voting was attitude to the Agreement. Those who believed that the Agreement was basically wrong were significantly more likely to vote DUP. The strength of unionist identity was the next best predictor, with those who considered themselves to be a 'strong' or 'fairly strong' unionist significantly more likely to favour the DUP. Attitudes to police reform also featured, with those who believed that the reform of the police had gone too far being more likely to vote DUP as were those claimed to have little or no interest in politics.

Table 1 Factors associated with voting DUP rather than UUP among Protestants

	B	S.E	Sig
<i>Demographics</i>			
Self-perceived social class	-.860**	.31	.006
Highest educational qualification	.526	.34	.119
Age	-.024*	.01	.014

<i>Attitudes</i>			
Attitudes to Agreement	-1.573**	.30	.000
Strength of unionist identity	-1.288**	.35	.000
Belief that the DUP has changed	-.831**	.30	.006
Interest in politics	.687*	.30	.023
Attitudes to police reform	-.596*	.29	.040
Constant	3.222		

However, alongside these largely predictable findings another important factor emerged. Protestants who believed that the DUP had ‘changed as a party and become more willing to compromise with nationalists’ were more likely to vote DUP. This finding is particularly interesting. It is important to remember that a significant relationship does not imply causality – we do not know if some people voted DUP because they believed that it had changed or whether DUP voters are just more likely to say that it has changed. However the results do suggest that this was an important factor and provides some support to those who argue that the DUP should not (or should no longer) be characterised as an ‘extreme’ party. It also raises the question of whether a body of Protestants who would not have been traditional DUP supporters chose to vote DUP *because* they felt it had changed.

While these election and survey results undoubtedly make good reading for the DUP in terms of indicating its current electoral strength, at the same time there is evidence to suggest that they could also pose potential difficulties and challenges for the party leadership in the future. If, for instance, there is now added diversity in the profile of the DUP voter, this could raise certain questions for the future prospects of the party. The most obvious of these is whether the DUP has just ‘borrowed’ support from those traditionally UUP voters who believe that the DUP has changed. Ensuring that ‘borrowed support’ becomes long-term support may involve reconciling what may be differing underlying values between the traditional DUP voters and those more recently converted. Thus, it is useful to compare the profile of DUP voters in 1998 and DUP voters in 2003.

Table 2 compares the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of DUP voters in the two elections. Clearly two factors may be at work here and it is not possible to disentangle them without further analysis. The first is, simply, that DUP voters have changed their attitudes over time. The second is that DUP voters – literally – change over time, with a new ‘cohort’ of differing views joining the ranks starting from 2003. Bearing this in mind, the results are still revealing.

In terms of demographics there is both stability and change. Just as in 1998, the DUP voters of 2003 are highly likely to describe themselves as working class. However, although we know from the previous analysis that DUP supporters are generally younger than UUP supporters, it is clear from Table 2 that the DUP does not have perhaps quite as young a profile as they had in 1998. In terms of attitudes, the picture is mixed. Unsurprisingly, the sense that the Agreement is unfair is just as strong, or even stronger, in 2003 than in 1998. However, support for the Assembly remains robust – perhaps even slightly stronger among 2003 DUP voters than it was before. Backing for the constitutional guarantee that Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom for

as long as the majority of people in Northern Ireland want it to do so, remains steady, standing at an overwhelming 98% in 1998 and 97% in 2003.

Table 2 Comparison of characteristics of DUP voters in 1998 and DUP voters in 2003

	DUP voters 1998	DUP voters 2003
	%	%
Believe that nationalists have benefited a lot more from the Agreement	66	72
Support North-South bodies	21	39
Support Assembly	69	73
Support power-sharing	35	71
Support the guarantee that NI will remain part of the UK as long as the majority of people in NI want this	98	97
Voted 'yes'/would vote 'yes' to Agreement now	15	20
Believe that the DUP party leaders should be willing to compromise	30	38
Aged 18-30	24	14
Self-perceived working class	75	77

But in other areas there were noticeable changes. From 1998 to 2003 there was a dramatic increase in the level of support for North-South bodies - from 21% to 39%. Over the same period there has also been a dramatic rise in support for a system of power-sharing within Northern Ireland - from 35% to 71%. Both of these effects are too large to be explained solely by a change in the profile of the DUP voter and are much more likely to reflect a change in general views (for example, that north-south bodies have turned out to be fairly harmless and the status quo of power-sharing has simply become accepted). Other changes however are more surprising. In particular, 20% of the DUP voters of 2003 said that they would vote 'yes' if the referendum on the Agreement were held again. This could possibly be indicative of a changing DUP support base. Those who despaired of the UUP could well have voted DUP because they felt there was no other realistic option - and yet still retain faith that the Agreement (or more likely a renegotiated Agreement) remained the way forward. Finally, what has also changed slightly is the general attitude to compromise within the party. Whereas in 1998 some 30% of DUP voters thought that the leaders of the DUP should be 'willing to compromise' (rather than 'stick to their principles'), in 2003 the equivalent figure was 38%.

If the profile of DUP voters has indeed changed between 1998 and 2003, this places a certain amount of pressure on the DUP leadership. Since the referendum on the Agreement, key strategists within the party have worked to encourage realignment within unionism by attracting former members or supporters of the UUP, who had grown increasingly disillusioned by its stance on the Agreement. To a large extent this approach has brought enormous gains not only in electoral terms but also in the high profile decision of Jeffrey Donaldson, formerly an UUP MP and prominent member of the party, to join the DUP in January 2004.

With this success however now comes added pressure on the DUP leadership to find a balance which appeals not only to its core electorate but those new voters the party has attracted. One tension is the party's steadfast attitude to the Agreement and Northern Ireland's present constitutional position, while at the same time DUP voters are indicating growing support for North-South bodies, for some system of power-sharing and the need for the party leadership to compromise to achieve an overall political settlement.

Further evidence of this emerging contrast between traditional party values and the not so traditional comes when DUP voters were asked:

- *“Regardless of the results of the election, and if you had a completely free choice – which two politicians would you personally like to see as First Minister and Deputy First Minister?”*

Table 3. Choice for First Minister among DUP voters in 2003

	%
Ian Paisley Senior	28
Peter Robinson	21
Jeffrey Donaldson	13
David Trimble	12
Nigel Dodds	11
Ian Paisley Junior	5

Once again the response to this question was rather surprising. Given that since its formation back in September 1971 the DUP has been led and closely associated with one individual, the Reverend Ian Paisley, it would seem safe to assume that he would have been the overwhelming choice of DUP voters. Instead, as Table 3 shows, no clear favourite emerges with Paisley only favoured by 28%. In addition the fact that David Trimble still scored so highly amongst DUP voters as their choice as First Minister - 12% opted for him - is slightly surprising given the UUP's performance at the elections in 2003. Again the evidence seems to be pointing in the direction of this changing profile of DUP voters with people possibly looking beyond a time when the DUP is no longer dominated by the presence of Ian Paisley.

Conclusion

Recent election results in Northern Ireland supported by evidence from public attitude surveys all point to significant shift in the balance within unionism. For the British and Irish governments in their ongoing efforts to end the current political stalemate and to restore some form of devolved administration in Northern Ireland, the implications of such a development needs to be taken on board. The confirmation that Protestant voters now consider that the DUP is the most effective voice for unionists has clearly to be recognised and has to be built into any future negotiations. Whilst some might consider that this will make the prospects for progress much more difficult, the fact that the

evidence from public attitude surveys points to the changes within the DUP support base over the period from 1998 – 2003 does not mean that it is an impossible task.

This Devolution Briefing was written by Lizanne Dowds and Brendan Lynn of the Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive (ARK). It draws on a survey conducted following the Northern Ireland Assembly Elections of 2003. The survey was funded by the ESRC as part of its Devolution and Constitutional Change programme.

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