

**Consociationalism and the evolution of political cleavages in Northern
Ireland, 1989-2004**

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Political cleavages are often understood as deriving from either deep-rooted social divisions or institutional incentives. Contemporary Northern Ireland provides a test of the mutability of apparently entrenched cleavages under conditions of institutional change. Research undertaken before the ceasefire and Good Friday Agreements in the 1990s found noticeable asymmetries in the patterns of cleavage within the unionist and nationalist blocs. Within the unionist bloc, economic 'left-right' issues augmented differences on the ethno-national issue, resulting in a two-dimensional structure to ideological divisions between the major unionist parties. This contrasted with a uni-dimensional, ethno-national, source of ideological division amongst nationalists. The emergence of a consociational form of government structure since then demonstrates the ability of institutional incentives to swiftly reform some aspects of party support and competition. Between 1989 and 2004 there was little change in the sources of support for Sinn Féin relative to the SDLP, but the influence of left-right ideology within the unionist bloc was dramatically attenuated, so that differences between DUP and UUP support now only relate to the ethno-national dimension.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, party identification, left-right values, unionism, nationalism, consociationalism.

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Introduction

Traditionally political cleavages have been seen as representing the expression of social divisions through the electoral system (Lipset 1960), and Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) celebrated and influential work on cleavages emphasized broad patterns of social division arising from a country's historic development. An alternative approach has argued that institutional arrangements or party strategies are decisive in shaping cleavages, however. Whereas Lipset and Rokkan place the emphasis on the character of pre-existing social cleavages, Duverger (1954) focused on the importance of the electoral system in structuring voter interests and channelling popular concerns into packaged policy programs. For others, parties play a dominant role:

“Class, ethnicity, religion, race or nation do not happen spontaneously, of themselves, as a reflection of the objective conditions in the psyches of individuals... [I]ndividual voting behaviour is an effect of the activities of political parties.” (Przeworski 1985: 99-101, see also Sartori 1969: 85).

Amorim Neto and Cox (1997: 150) neatly summarize the general ‘top down’ view on cleavage formation:

“politicians can take socially defined groups and combine or recombine them in many ways for political purposes - so that a given set of social cleavages does not imply a unique set of politically activated cleavages, and hence does not imply a unique party system.”

This approach to understanding the structuring of preferences has expanded in the growing purposive choice approach (Katz 1980; Shepsle 1991), and Riker's (1982)

'heresthetics', while other institutional theorists have concentrated on the impact of presidentialism or parliamentarism on the types of political divisions that emerge (Lijphart 1992; Shugart & Carey 1992).¹

Northern Ireland provides an intriguing, topical and politically important test case of the impact of institutional change on cleavage structure. In the space of a few years there have been dramatic changes to the political landscape as the violent conflict of the 1960s to the 1990s gave way to, at times tortuous but none the less consequential, negotiated moves towards a devolved consociational form of political system. In this paper we examine the possibility that these institutional changes have in turn re-shaped cleavages through the introduction of new incentives and opportunity structures, thus testing the institutionalist case in an environment where political cleavages have often been considered deeply entrenched. Thus whilst a growing literature addresses whether consociationalism is a positive or negative development in Northern Ireland, this paper in contrast explores the actual effects of institutional change on political attitudes.

The pre-Agreement cleavage structure and its implications for party strategy

The Northern Irish party system has accurately been represented as two systems, in which party competition occurs within nationalist and unionist blocs. Social and ideological divisions within these blocs constrain parties' electoral strategies and facilitate, or inhibit, cross-communal compromise and the viability of devolved government. Earlier research has found noticeable asymmetries in the patterns of cleavage within the unionist and nationalist blocs. Among Protestants, left/right ideology had a far stronger impact than ethno-national position on patterns of partisanship, with the parties split on mainly economic issues, not issues relating to

sectarian defence.² On the nationalist side, party support was polarised much more along ethno-national lines, with no crosscutting ideological division over economic inequality (Evans and Duffy 1997). Given that even in societies characterized by entrenched communal conflicts political actors are, at least in part, motivated by the need to maintain or improve levels of electoral support across their constituencies, distributions of preferences that indicate cross-communal compromise will be punished electorally and decrease the possibility of a stable devolved arrangement.³ Thus the pattern of intra-communal party competition within the unionist bloc militated against compromise by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) on the ethno-national issue. On the other hand, amongst nationalists the uni-dimensional structure of competition for electoral support and the relatively centrist pattern of attitudes towards the constitutional issue were likely to influence the adoption of constitutionally centrist strategies by Sinn Féin.

Ensuing events have in large part been consistent with this prediction, as Sinn Féin has squeezed the Social and Democratic Liberal Party (SDLP) and become an increasingly important electoral force and political player. In the mid-1990s political manoeuvring by the party helped precipitate the Framework Documents, the 1994 cease-fire, and negotiations about all-party talks leading up to the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). These can be seen as strategic moves on the part of the Sinn Féin leadership responding to a political situation where their electoral future was under doubt.⁴

On the unionist side, in contrast, there was less need for the two main parties to moderate their positions on the ethno-national issue in order to compete for votes. Though the distribution of unionist sympathies has typically been skewed to the position adopted by the DUP, the parties' other distinctive bases of support undercut

the need for a shift to their position by the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). The identification of a prominent left/right axis distinguishing party supporters suggests that the constitution was not purely determinative of electoral outcomes. But of course, this was before the advent of consociationalism in Northern Ireland.

Consociationalism and party competition

It is generally agreed that the GFA involved the implementation of an essentially consociational arrangement (Evans and O'Leary 2000; McGarry and O'Leary 2004; O'Leary 2001). This embodies the assumption that entrenched social divisions can best be accommodated through institutionalized power sharing arrangements. One consequence of consociational arrangements is that are likely to maximise seats through the mobilization of their core supporters, rather than by appeals across the communal divide (Horowitz 2001). This deal brings with it a set of implications for political divisions within and between the two main ethno-national camps in Northern Ireland.

Various commentators have argued that these arrangements will increase political polarisation in the region (Dixon 2002; Taylor 2001; Wilford 2001). From this perspective the two communal blocs are consolidated rather than undermined by an institutional affirmation of the distinctiveness of the two traditions of unionism and nationalism. As a consequence, the party most strongly associated with sectarian defence benefits electorally and flourishes politically. Parties are rewarded for furthering the interests of the separate communities rather than their ability to build cross-communal consensus through compromise. Thus maximising communal resources provides the battleground within the separate blocs, and the dominant party on this dimension will win.

In these circumstances it is not surprising therefore that the 2001 Westminster and District elections saw 7 per cent and 6 per cent swings from the UUP to DUP among Protestants, although at that time the UUP still remained the larger of the two parties (Tonge 2002). Similarly, before the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, Sinn Féin averaged 11 per cent of the vote. Since the 1994 ceasefire Sinn Féin has increased its vote at every election, from 16 per cent in 1996 to 24 per cent in 2003 (O'Leary and Evans 1997). So that by the time of the 2003 Assembly elections the two more 'extreme' parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin were expected to win majority support within their respective communities. These elections were postponed twice but eventually took place on 26 November.⁵ As anticipated, the DUP and Sinn Féin were the big winners, and their electoral advances were even greater than many people expected.

The competition for the nationalist vote produced the clearest victory yet for Sinn Féin. The SDLP fell back to fourth place. Indeed its 2003 vote was its worst performance in a NI election since the 1973 local government elections (the SDLP's first competitive election). Demographic and attitudinal evidence from the 2003 Northern Ireland Election Survey presented by Mitchell *et al* (2005) suggests that even the SDLP's own supporters have serious doubts about its future, and the youth vote is clearly Sinn Féin's. A similar pattern of change was to be found amongst the unionist parties. In 2003 the UUP received only 23 per cent of the vote, and the DUP became the largest NI party with just under 26 per cent of the vote.⁶ Mitchell *et al* (2005) find that 92 per cent of the DUP's 1998 voters remained loyal to the party in 2003, with only a handful switching to the UUP. By contrast a quarter of 1998 UUP voters defected to the DUP. There was a similar (though not quite so sharp) pattern in the nationalist party system: nearly a fifth of SDLP voters defected to Sinn Féin in 2003, a

clear break with practice up until the mid-1990s, yet, similarly to the DUP, Sinn Féin held onto almost all of its 1998 voters.

Changing vote shares are mirrored to a large extent in the changing share of partisans that each party can count on. Figures 1 and 2 show that over the 1978-2004 period both the DUP and Sinn Féin have increased their share of Protestant and Catholic partisans quite radically. Yet most of this increase is towards the end of the period, during post-Agreement politics. As we might expect, partisan change has been more glacial than changes to the vote, due to the inherent long-term nature of partisanship, but the increasing number of DUP and Sinn Féin partisans is clear.

FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

These events and trends are consistent with the hypothesis that consociationalism encourages appeals to the sectarian base, rather than the construction of cross-communal alliances (Little 2004). Parties are evaluated in terms of how well they represent ‘their side’. Evidence on this is provided by the Northern Irish election survey which asked respondents “Which party do you think has been the most effective voice for nationalists/unionists in Northern Ireland?”. Mitchell *et al* (2005) find that over three times as many respondents picked Sinn Féin instead of the SDLP as the most effective party in representing nationalists. Supporters of every party placed Sinn Féin first on this question. The only party supporters that were divided on the subject were the SDLP, and even a narrow majority of its supporters (51 per cent) felt that Sinn Féin had been more effective than their own party in representing nationalist interests. Opinion was more divided among unionists, with each unionist party’s supporters judging their party to be the most effective defender of their interests. Nevertheless,

only 58 per cent of UUP supporters judged that it has been the most effective voice for unionism, with 39 per cent believing that the DUP had been more effective. By contrast, almost all DUP supporters thought that their own party has been the most effective.

Thus electoral benefits appear to have been accruing to parties that argue for maximising ethno-national group resources rather than compromise (see Pennings 1999). Whilst the DUP are increasingly adopting a policy of pragmatism to gain power, they have undoubtedly benefited from retaining the strongest voice of ethno-national defence (Dixon 2001; Farrington 2004, 2006; Ganiel 2006). Particularly in the immediate aftermath of the GFA, the DUP's militancy created a distinct and popular electoral platform. Ongoing Protestant disillusion with the GFA has ensured that support for the DUP has been based upon the continuing rejection of 'concessions' to nationalists arising from the package of measures which accompany the consociational architecture of the GFA (Hayes and McAllister 2001, 2005). On the nationalist side, there is general support for the GFA so that compromises with respect to nationalism and the use of armed force by the IRA can be seen as a direct form of competition with the SDLP for the nationalist vote. Sinn Féin sells itself as the most effective nationalist party in defending the implementation of the GFA, which brings with it of course the promotion of the equality and power sharing that more immediately and obviously benefits nationalists rather than unionists.

In the rest of this paper we examine how this changing political landscape has impacted on the structure of cleavages over the last decade and a half. Have we seen a growth in the importance of ethno-nationalism rather than other sources of political allegiance? In other words, has consociationalism changed the social cleavage structure of Northern Ireland from a situation where, at least among unionists, there were two

clear dimensions (strength of unionism and left-right) to a simplified uni-dimensional ideological polarization over the strength of defence of unionist bloc interests? Alternatively, has Sinn Féin's move to the centre along the same dimension squeezed the SDLP thus reducing the salience of ideological differences within the nationalist community for party support? The conclusions relate our findings both to arguments concerning cleavage formation and perpetuation, and to some extent the prospects of future success for a devolved Stormont Assembly.

Methods and data

We use data from the 1989-1996 Northern Irish Social Attitudes Surveys (NISAS), and the 1998-2004 Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys (NILTS).⁷ Ideally we would want to go back somewhat further in time, but whilst there is data from 1978⁸, as in Figures 1-2, on partisan choice the independent variables we are interested in are not measured in any consistent manner prior to 1989. We divide the pooled sample into three groups: Protestants, Catholics and others. This division is on the basis of self-reported religion, and given the nature of politics in Northern Ireland we only go on to look at the Protestant and Catholic groups. Those with no religion (and the very small minority of people that are religious but non-Christians) make up slightly under 10 per cent of our pooled sample.⁹

We measure partisanship using the standard set of questions. Respondents were asked:

‘Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?’
[IF NONE] ‘Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to others?’

Most Protestants and Catholics were willing to identify themselves with a political party: overall 78 per cent of Catholics and 81 per cent of Protestants were willing to give an identification.¹⁰ We have excluded those that did not identify with a party from further analysis and combined some smaller parties into single categories. For Protestants we divide partisans into supporters of the UUP, the DUP and then non-unionist parties. Those identifying with other unionist parties (such as the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP)) have been excluded; as Figure 1 showed these parties never secured large proportions of the Protestant electorate's allegiance and by 2004 had extremely few partisans. For Catholics, we divide partisans into supporters of the SDLP partisans, Sinn Féin and finally non-nationalist parties.¹¹

In terms of explaining partisanship we are interested here in two main types of predictors; social/structural based differences and value/issue-based differences. For the former we have standard measures of social characteristics, such as education (degree, post 16 education, up to 16 only); social class (service class, other non-manual, skilled manual and unskilled manual)¹²; church attendance (weekly, monthly, occasionally, never); and sex and birth cohort (measured as a categorical variable with 10-year cohorts). We also measure denomination (Free Presbyterian, Presbyterian, Methodist, other Protestant and Anglican) for Protestants as this is linked to partisanship (see for example Bruce (1986, 2001) or Abele McIver (1987)). Year is included as a continuous variable and coded as the number of years since 1989, the beginning of the period for which we have data.

For value/issue-based differences we look at the two main dimensions within Northern Irish politics that have been previously discussed: ethno-national values and left-right values.

Measuring ethno-national values

The first of these scales measures the main issue cleavage in Northern Irish politics, the ethno-national, or unionist-nationalist, dimension. This is based on two questions as below:

‘Generally speaking do you think of yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither?’

[IF UNIONIST OR NATIONALIST] ‘Would you call yourself a very strong unionist/nationalist, fairly strong or not very strong?’

We have coded this separately for Catholics and Protestants. For the former this measures strength of nationalism; with 1 as unionist, 2 as neither unionist nor nationalist, 3 as not very strongly nationalist, 4 as fairly strongly nationalist, and finally 5 as very strongly nationalist. For Protestants, we measure strength of unionism; with 1 as nationalist, 2 as neither unionist nor nationalist, 3 as not very strongly unionist, 4 as fairly strongly unionist, and finally 5 as very strongly unionist.

Measuring left-right values

We were not able to use the conventional left-right values scale, as developed by Evans and Heath in Britain (Evans *et al* 1996, Heath *et al* 1994), as two of the questions were missing from all the later surveys. Instead we have created a similar scale using three of the five items from the Evans/Heath scale. These items concern wealth/ income redistribution and general ideas of inequality, and are as follows:

‘On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government’s responsibility to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor?’

‘Do you agree that there is one law for the rich and one law for the poor?’

‘Do you agree that ordinary working people get their fair share of the nation’s wealth?’

All these questions had the standard ‘Strongly agree’, ‘Agree’, ‘Neither agree nor disagree’, ‘Disagree’, ‘Strongly disagree’ response format. A scale was created by summing the individual item responses, and dividing by 3, and was coded so 5 was the most left-wing set of responses and 1 the most right-wing. As we would expect given that three of the five questions are the same, there is an extremely strong correlation between our scale and the conventional scale of .95 if we look at the 1989-1991 period for which we have all five items.¹³

FIGURES 3-4 ABOUT HERE

As Figures 3-4 show, there has been little consistent change in either Catholics’ or Protestants’ values over the 1989-2004 period. Generally speaking the changes in both unionist and nationalist values are trendless, there are some peaks and troughs as we might expect given the changing political context, but no clear pattern. This is also true of Protestants’ left-right values, and really the only trend that is distinguishable is the slight movement of Catholics economically rightwards over this period.¹⁴

Analysis

The unionist parties

Model 1 in Table 1 presents the results of a multinomial logistic regression predicting party identification using social characteristics, values and year for the pooled data-set between 1989 and 2004. As we can see there has been some change over time increasing the number of DUP partisans, although change over time is also explained by the large differences by generation. That is newer cohorts of voters appear more

likely to be DUP supporters than older cohorts, and these newer generations are gradually replacing the older UUP partisans.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As a whole, our findings are consistent with the social bases of party support in Northern Ireland documented before (McAllister 1983; Evans and Duffy 1997; Breen and Hayes 1997). DUP supporters (compared to the UUP) are less likely to be highly educated, more likely to be working class, somewhat more likely to not attend church and more likely to be Free Presbyterians or members of other small conservative Protestant denominations. Conversely those identifying with non-unionist parties are more highly educated and much more likely to come from the middle class. Again, this fits with the previous literature (Breen and Hayes 1997).

More interestingly we also see in model 1 a very strong effect of values. DUP partisans are more leftwing (as the top of the scale is the most leftwing set of responses) and are more unionist (as the top of the scale is the most unionist response). These effects are by no means small either. A very rightwing Protestant (scoring 1 on our scale), has only an 18 per cent predicted probability of being a DUP partisan rather than a UUP partisan, compared to a 47 per cent probability for a very leftwing Protestant (scoring 5 on our scale). Similarly a very strongly unionist Protestant (scoring 5 on our scale), has a 46 per cent predicted probability of being a DUP partisan rather than a UUP partisan, compared to only a 22 per cent probability for a very weakly unionist Protestant (scoring 1 on our scale).¹⁵

We also see an expected, but still extremely large, effect of unionism on support for the non-unionist parties in model 1. Clearly strong unionist values effectively

preclude one from identifying with a non-unionist party; using the same assumptions as above, model 1 predicts that strong unionists (scoring 5) have a negligible change of being non-unionist partisans, compared to 78 per cent for those with the weakest levels of unionism (scoring 1). There are no differences attributable to left-right values.

This paper is concerned with change however, and as discussed there is good reason to think that the basis of competition between the main parties has changed due to the changing institutional arrangements in Northern Ireland. Therefore in model 2 we include interaction terms between year and values. Since we measure time as the number of years since 1989 the main effects of left-right and unionist values are simply the effects in 1989 (when years since 1989 is equal to zero). With this in mind, and looking at the predictors of identifying with the DUP, it is clear that the effects of left-right values are much stronger and the effects of unionist values much weaker at the beginning of the period. These striking differences over time are most clearly shown in Figures 5 and 6.

FIGURES 5-6 ABOUT HERE

Figure 5 plots the predicted probability of identifying with the DUP, relative to the UUP, for a Protestant in 1989 and 2004, dependent on their left-right values.¹⁶ In 1989, the number of DUP identifiers is relatively small in general, but the effect of left-right values is large. Less than 10 per cent of the most right-wing respondents are DUP partisans, compared to nearly 45 per cent of the most left-wing. Yet in 2004, there is essentially no discernible effect of left-right values. We predict more DUP identifiers in 2004 generally, but being more leftwing at this time makes no difference to one's partisanship. What makes this even more interesting is that there is effectively a mirror

image of this change for unionist values. Figure 6 shows the predicted probabilities of identifying with the DUP by levels of unionism for 1989 and 2004. Whereas in 1989, there is only a very small effect of unionism, by 2004 this effect is extremely strong; as the impact of left-right values has declined the impact of unionist values has increased. Thus we see a substantial change amongst Protestants in the causes of party identification over this 15 year period. In only a short period of time, Northern Ireland has gone from a situation in which competition amongst the two main unionist parties was broadly founded on a left-right social cleavage, with a subsidiary ethno-national cleavage, to a situation in which the ethno-national aspect is completely dominant and left-right divisions within the Protestant electorate play no role in forming party support.¹⁷

The changes in the predictors of identification for the non-unionist parties are perhaps less notable. Although unionism has increased in importance as a predictor, the effect is already so large that this makes little practical difference, and the interaction term has only borderline statistical significance. The switch over time from non-unionist party supporters being somewhat more left-wing to becoming somewhat more right-wing is interesting, and can be perhaps explained by a loss of more radical Alliance voters to other small parties such as the Green Party. Ultimately though these effects are rather small in comparison to the changes in how choice between the DUP and UUP are made.

The nationalist parties

Table 2 presents a similar set of regression models to that in Table 1, but for Catholics. Model 3 here shows that in terms of social characteristics the contrast between the two nationalist parties is similar to that amongst the two main unionist parties. Sinn Féin

supporters (compared to the SDLP) are likely to be much less educated, less likely to attend church, and more working class. The same twin processes of change over time appear to be happening as well, with a general trend towards more Sinn Féin identifiers, but also the replacement of older more SDLP supporting cohorts with newer more Sinn Féin supporting cohorts. There are less significant demographic differences between the SDLP partisans and non-nationalist supporters.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

There are also many similarities in how values predict party identity. More left-wing and more nationalist voters are more likely to be Sinn Féin partisans; although the left-right effect is less strong than the differences we saw between DUP and UUP partisans whilst the ethno-national issue appears more important. Equally, and unsurprisingly, having only weak nationalist values is a very good predictor of supporting a non-nationalist party. What differs here is that we see very little change over time. In model 4 in Table 2 we include two interaction terms between values and year, and find essentially no evidence of change. There is only a small improvement to the model fit, and this is due to the weakening relationship between nationalism and division between the non-nationalist partisans and the SDLP, not any changes to the divisions between Sinn Féin and the SDLP. For Catholics we simply do not see much impact of the institutional changes in Northern Ireland; whilst the proportion of Sinn Féin partisans has grown the underlying divisions between the parties seem much more resilient with a relatively weak cleavage on left-right grounds, and a much stronger cleavage defined by strength of ethno-nationalism. The relative magnitudes of the effects of left-right and nationalist values are shown in Figure 7.¹⁸

FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE

Discussion and Conclusion

From their analysis of the social bases of party preference in the early 1990s Evans and Duffy conclude that “there are important asymmetries in the factors which condition partisanship on either side of the communal divide, with cross-cutting cleavages far more pronounced on the unionist than on the nationalist side.” (Evans and Duffy 1997: 78). The importance of the left/right division within the unionist bloc meant that the main unionist parties were sheltered from competition on ethno-national issues. This has clearly changed, and we now see a situation where the UUP is exposed to competition from a DUP with an ideological position closer to Protestant voters; there is now no other source of issue or ideological distinctiveness to preserve the UUP’s support from corrosion in the context of a post-consociational electoral scene.

Evidence from the 2003 election study confirms this interpretation of these changing patterns of party support. A majority of the SDLP’s own supporters regard Sinn Féin as the most effective party standing up for nationalists. The pattern is similar among unionists. Even among those UUP supporters that remained loyal to their party in 2003, 39 per cent think that their rivals in the DUP are a more effective voice for unionists. Clearly then, an alteration in the dimensionality of the cleavages in Northern Ireland not only tells us something about how institutional incentives can affect cleavage salience, but also indicates the likely pattern of electoral success and strategy of the main political competitors. The notion that cleavages are to some degree frozen at the point of enfranchisement is clearly contradicted by this case study of an effectively immediate change in the structure of cleavages in response to a very specific alteration in the institutional incentive structure for competing parties. This finding is

far more consistent with top down elite lead approaches to cleavage formation, than with sociological models that see electoral divisions as the direct representation of social structural interests. As such it adds empirical confirmation of the malleability of cleavage structures.

For understanding the Northern Ireland context, however, it is important also to take note of the softening political party positions that lie behind the familiar rhetoric of ethnic defence. A vote for Sinn Féin or the DUP means something rather different than it did ten, or even five, years ago. If we consider a DUP party conference picketed by Protestant evangelicals for being too secular (see Southern 2005), regular DUP trips to Dublin and expanding working relationships with Sinn Féin in nearly all forms of civic life, it is clear that the DUP is shifting to a more pragmatic position to maximise their electoral power (Dixon 2001; Farrington 2004, 2006; Ganiel 2006). The same holds for Sinn Féin who, having agreed to a partitionist settlement in 1998, has focused ever more attention on reform of Northern Ireland. Their project of 'Building an Ireland of Equals', which retains a clear unification dimension, has been targeted principally north of the border (O'Hearn *et al* 1999). Murray and Tonge (2005) argue that the extent of Sinn Féin's constitutional compromises was made good by clever marketing of the GFA as a 'transitional' settlement. Whilst Ryan (1994) may overstate the case in his 'death of republicanism' thesis, it is clear that Sinn Féin is a very different political animal after the GFA.

The political rhetoric from both the DUP and Sinn Féin remains defiant of course, but the substance has changed. This perhaps points to the dual effect of consociationalism. On one hand existing groups are reified and communal competition for votes is encouraged. On the other, at the party level having to work together leads to increased pragmatism and practical cooperation. With the recent disarmament of the

IRA, and provided the UK and Irish governments can protect the region's power-sharing institutions, there is every reason to suppose that the present ascendancy of the DUP and Sinn Féin need not undermine further negotiations and prevent the implementation of a fully functioning Assembly. The growing pragmatism of the DUP and Sinn Féin is informed by, and shapes in turn, the increased willingness of the electorate to compromise. Mitchell *et al's* (2005) analysis of the 2003 NI election survey shows there has been increasing cross-community support for mandatory power-sharing and decommissioning, and reduced fear of North-South bodies among Protestants as these aspects of political life have become more familiar (for evidence of, in some respects, less positive attitudes at earlier time points see Evans and O'Leary 1997, 2000). Analysis of the NILTS in 2004 shows that less than half of Catholic respondents wanted Irish unity, and less than one in twenty would find it "almost impossible to accept" if this never happened. Equally whilst 85 per cent of Protestants wanted to remain part of the UK in 2004, if the majority of people voted for a united Ireland, less than 15 per cent said they would find this almost impossible to accept. This shows that despite a hardening of the ethno-national dimension of political competition and the elimination of the crosscutting left-right cleavage amongst Protestants, there is growing acceptance of the reality of political change.

Therefore in some ways there is a positive message: the reduction in the number of effective unionist parties from two to one may prevent ethnic outbidding. The DUP has no militant in-bloc rival and is thus insulated from electoral punishment by gravitating towards moderation and towards a deal with the leadership of the rival bloc, headed now by Sinn Féin, having used militancy for the initial garnering of votes. Against this interpretation, we do have to note that the shift of Protestants to a party of greater ethnic militancy, and a simple ethno-national cleavage dividing the two unionist

parties, may not augur well for the onset of stable political arrangements. Although the link between a major political party, the UUP and the anti-Catholic Church Orange Order, has ended, as Evans and Tonge (forthcoming) observe “few see the realignment of Protestant votes to the DUP, a party hostile to all aspects of Irish republicanism, as indicative of a thawing of sectarian hostilities, in which Northern Ireland’s faultline can be managed and consociation might flourish”.

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FIGURE 1: *Protestant partisans by party, 1978-2004*

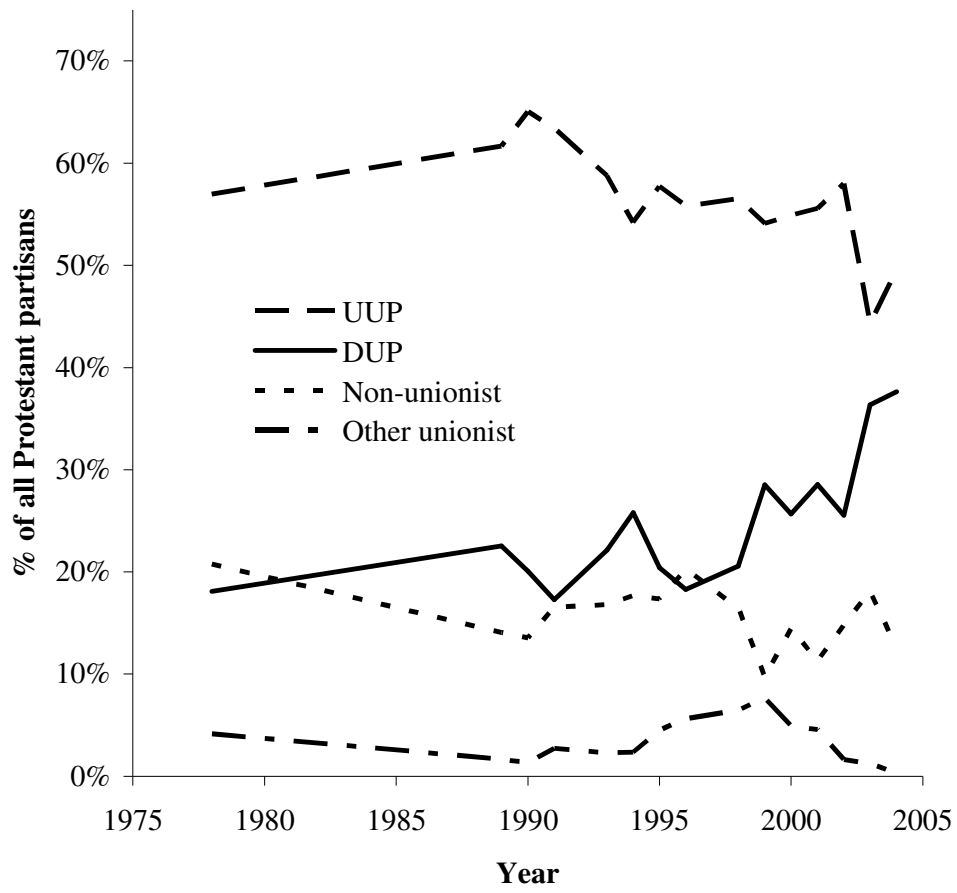


FIGURE 2: *Catholic partisans by party, 1978-2004*

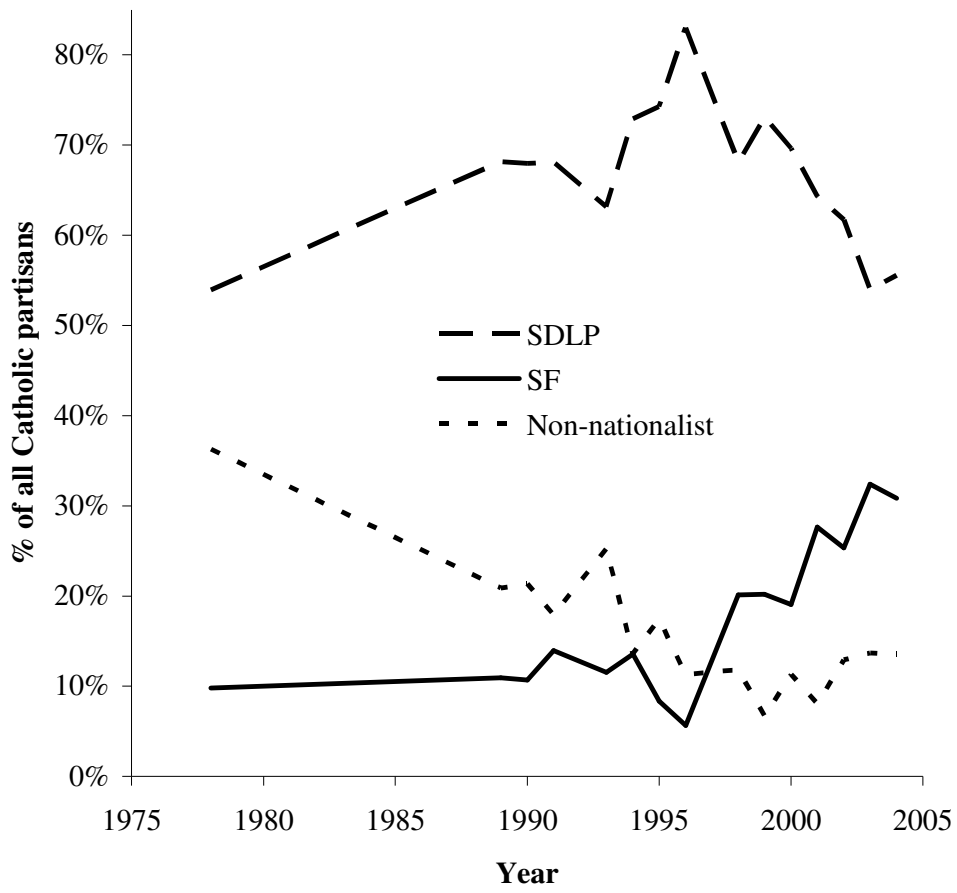


FIGURE 3: *Protestant political values, 1989-2004*

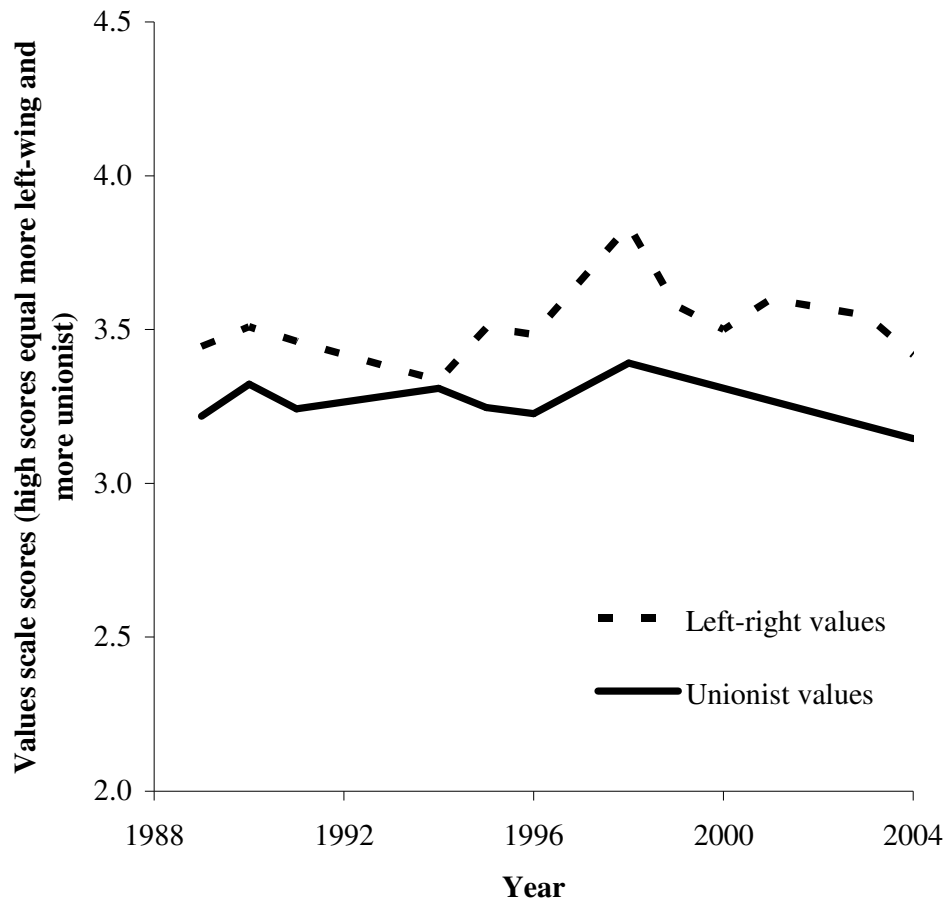


FIGURE 4: *Catholic political values, 1989-2004*

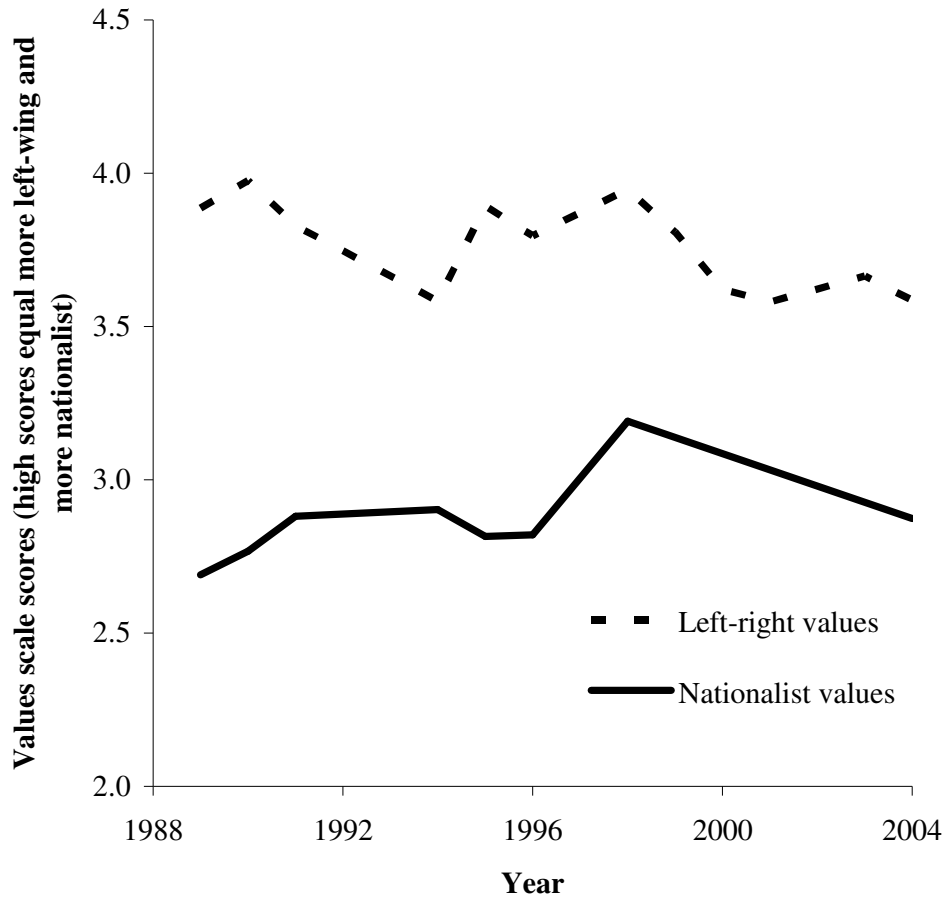


TABLE 1: *Logistic models predicting partisanship for all self-identified Protestants relative to UUP partisans*

		MODEL 1		MODEL 2	
		DUP	Non-unionist	DUP	Non-unionist
Constant		-4.00***	2.86***	-4.30***	1.67***
No. of years after 1989		.07***	-.02	.11**	.19**
Female		.17	-.26**	.18*	-.26**
Denomination	Free Presbyterian	4.50***	-.97	4.52***	-.76
	Presbyterian	.36***	-.13	.34***	-.12
	Methodist	.01	.51**	-.01	.51**
	Other Protestant	1.03***	.23	1.02***	.23
	Anglican	-	-	-	-
Social class	Service	-.85***	.85***	-.88***	.86***
	Other non-manual	-.37***	.62***	-.34**	.64***
	Skilled manual	-.26**	.54***	-.24*	.55***
	Unskilled manual	-	-	-	-
Education	Degree	-.85***	.77***	-.83***	.82***
	Post 16	-.56***	.40***	-.55***	.43**
	Up to 16 only	-	-	-	-
Birth cohort	1970+	2.18***	-.30	2.15***	-.34
	1960-1969	1.55***	-.22	1.52***	-.22
	1950-1959	1.04***	-.10	1.01***	-.08
	1940-1949	.57***	.10	.56***	.13
	1930-1939	.17	-.07	.17	-.04
	Pre 1920	-	-	-	-
Church attendance	Weekly or more	-.62***	-.16	-.63***	-.16
	Monthly	-.71***	-.20	-.70***	-.20
	Occasionally	-.33**	-.33*	-.33**	-.36*
	Never	-	-	-	-
Left-right values		.36***	.05	.63***	.26**
Unionist values		.30***	-1.54***	.11	-1.38***
Year*LR values				-.04***	-.04**
Year*Unionist values				.03**	-.03*
Pseudo-R ² (C&S)		.36		.37	
-2 LL change (d.f.)		1461.86*** (44)		24.47*** (4)	

* p<.10 ** p<.05 ***p<.01. Unweighted N = 3220. Source: NISASs 1989, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1995, 1996 and the NILTSs 1998 and 2004.

FIGURE 5: *Predicted probability of DUP partisanship (relative to UUP partisanship) by left-right values for 1989 and 2004*

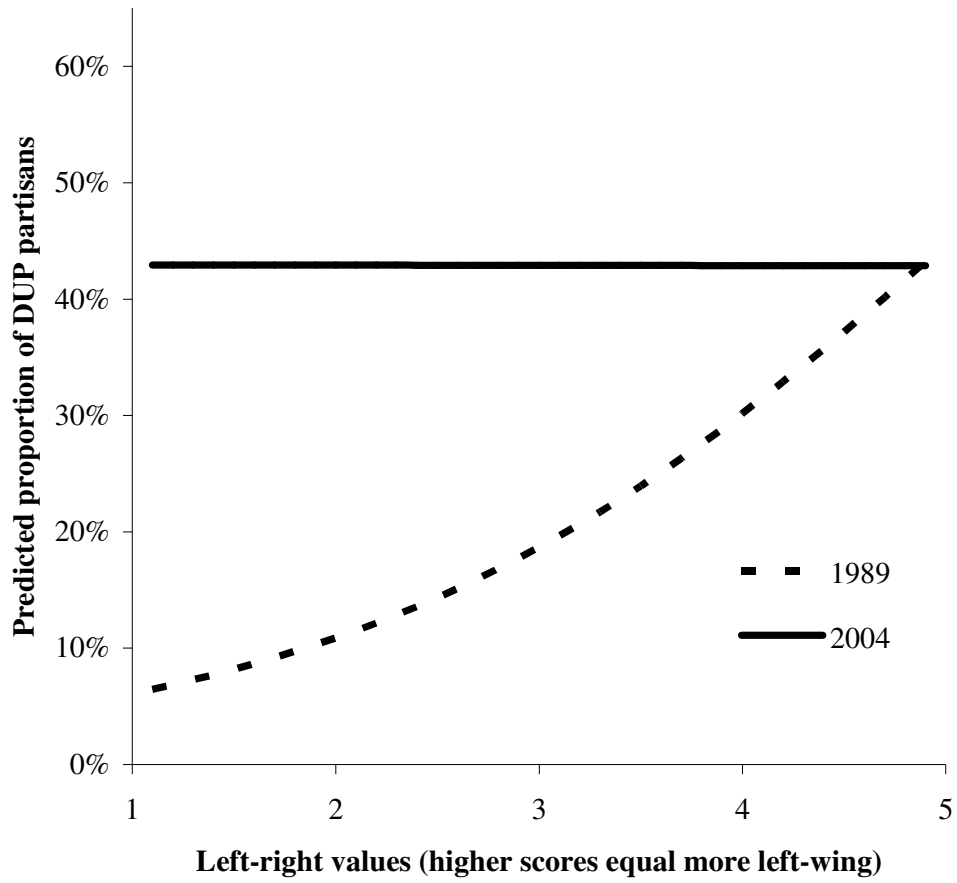


FIGURE 6: *Predicted probability of DUP partisanship (relative to UUP partisanship) by unionist values for 1989 and 2004*

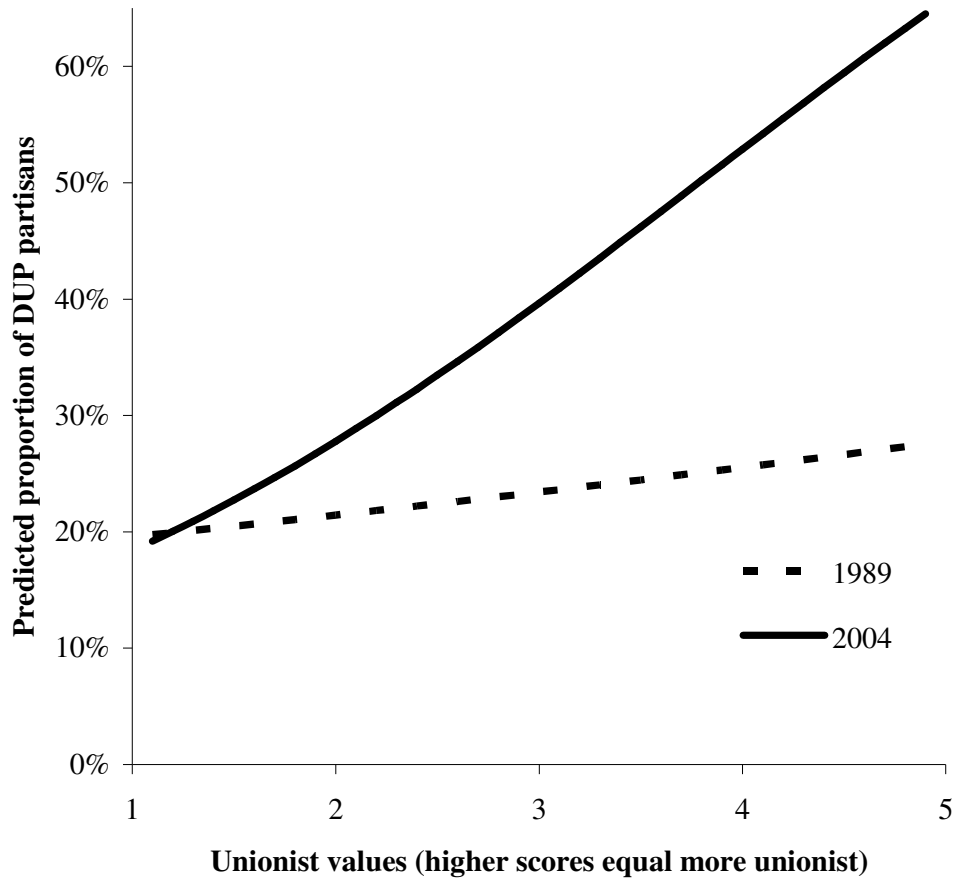
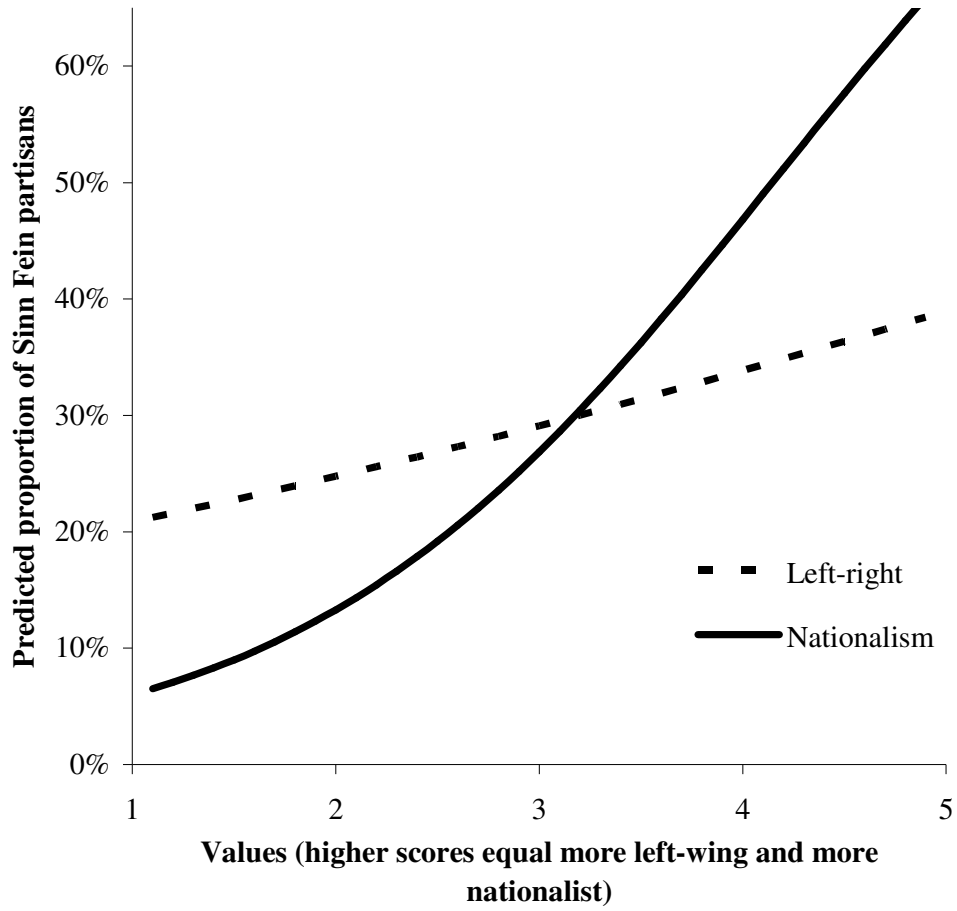


TABLE 2: *Logistic models predicting partisanship for all self-identified Catholics relative to SDLP partisans*

		MODEL 3		MODEL 4	
		Sinn Féin	Non-nationalist	Sinn Féin	Non-nationalist
Constant		-5.75***	2.25***	-6.19***	3.45***
No. of years after 1989		.09***	-.03*	.14*	-.21**
Female		-.20	.38***	-.20	.37***
Social class	Service	-.57**	.12	-.57**	.12
	Other non-manual	-.43**	.19	-.42*	.18
	Skilled manual	-.18	.31	-.17	.29
	Unskilled manual	-	-	-	-
Education	Degree	-.70***	.15	-.69***	.14
	Post 16	-.23	.36**	-.22	.36*
	Up to 16 only	-	-	-	-
Birth cohort	1970+	1.90***	-.20	1.90***	-.18
	1960-1969	1.14***	-.26	1.15***	-.25
	1950-1959	.78**	-.06	.79**	-.08
	1940-1949	.17	.07	.18	.06
	1930-1939	.21	.48*	.22	.47*
	Pre 1920	-	-	-	-
Church attendance	Weekly or more	-.77***	-.80***	-.77***	-.83***
	Monthly	-.37	-.67**	.37	-.69**
	Occasionally	-.45	-.40	.44	-.40
	Never	-	-	-	-
Left-right values		.22**	-.11	.32*	-.22
Nationalist values		.87***	-1.13***	.89***	-1.45***
Year*LR values				-.01	.02
Year*Nationalist values				.00	.05**
Pseudo-R ²		.26		.26	
-2 LL change (d.f.)		619.72*** (36)	7.02** (4)		

* p<.10 ** p<.05 ***p<.01. Unweighted N = 1792. Source: NISASs 1989, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1995, 1996 and the NILTSs 1998 and 2004.

FIGURE 7: *Predicted probability of Sinn Féin partisanship (relative to SDLP partisanship) by nationalist and left-right values*



Endnotes

¹ Though it is worth emphasising, as others have done (see Bartolini and Mair 1990: 215), that the lines between these different perspectives are blurred and in practice many accounts are likely to be hybrid in character. Thus even Lipset and Rokkan were aware of strategic factors that help shape such divisions: “cleavages do not translate themselves into party oppositions as a matter of course; there are considerations of organisational and electoral strategy; there is the weighing of pay-offs of alliances against losses through split-offs ... we need information about *the opportunities, the pay-offs, and the costs of alliances* in the system” (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 27). Their enduring contribution has however been to interpret cleavage formation in a historical and long-term perspective.

² We describe this cleavage as ethno-national as we think this most accurately captures how and why voters are divided. Although the same cleavage might historically be described as constitutional for nationalists and republicans, it cannot be applied straightforwardly to unionist voters or parties, who are fairly unanimous in their constitutional preference to retain the union.

³ The notion of median voter competition is of course familiar from Downs’ influential propositions regarding the conditions under which rational parties compete, although given the information costs associated with understanding voter choices in terms of specific issue preferences, it is more plausible to view dimensions of competition as arising from differences in ideology among the electorate rather a diverse set of independent issues. An ideological orientation (*i.e.* unionist/nationalist) is likely to inform attitudes towards particular issues and thus serve as a heuristic for comprehending politics under conditions of low information rationality. See, for example, Hinich and Munger (1994).

⁴ Though this is not to discount the possibility that the IRA’s increasing recognition that a military strategy was not going to achieve their aims was also an important factor in shaping the nature of the change in republican attitudes.

⁵ Although we should remember that simply reaching a second scheduled election was something of an achievement for the Assembly as not one of the earlier Assemblies, Conventions, or Forums elected since the end of the Stormont regime in 1972 actually obtained a second term.

⁶ Moreover, following the 2003 elections three anti-Agreement UUP candidates resigned and joined the DUP. Therefore as of 2004, the latest period we look at here, the DUP had 33 Assembly representatives to the UUP's 24 representatives.

⁷ See <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/> for more details regarding the NILTSs and how these followed on from the earlier NISASs.

⁸ Partisan choices in 1978 come from the Moxon-Browne survey (Moxon-Brown 1983). Earlier data such as the 1968 Rose study (Rose 1971) are simply not comparable even on the partisanship measures (partially of course due to the radically different nature of the party structure prior to the 1970s).

⁹ As we wish to focus here on the main predictors of partisanship within the two communities, this does not seem unreasonable, especially when considering that in Northern Ireland, the absence of a religious affiliation is associated with the lack of a political identity (Breen and Hayes 1997).

¹⁰ A small proportion of respondents (7 per cent in 2004) answered that they identified with a mainland British political party rather than a Northern Irish party. These people were then asked 'If there were a general election in which only Northern Ireland parties were standing, which one do you think you would be most likely to support?' Most (80 per cent in 2004) were willing to give an answer, and this party has been coded as their Northern Irish party identification.

¹¹ Non-unionist and non-nationalist parties are, in order of strength, the Alliance, the Women's Coalition, the Northern Irish Labour party and the Green party. Of these, only the Alliance is currently represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Women's Coalition are now in 'hibernation'. For Protestants we also include the very small minority of SDLP and Sinn Féin supporters, and similarly for Catholics the very small number of UUP and DUP supporters.

¹² Note that we include another social class category in our models, for people that could not be classified. This has increased the number of cases in each year. As the coefficient for this group is not really interpretable, we do not report them in subsequent analysis.

¹³ For the combined 1989-2004 data-set these three items form a fairly internally coherent scale, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of .63

¹⁴ This is perhaps unsurprising, as recent decades have seen Catholics becoming increasingly middle class (Duffy and Evans 1997).

¹⁵ These predicted probabilities refer to a male, Anglican, working class Protestant in 1989 who has low education, was born in 1945 and never attends church, with the relevant mean values of left-right and unionist values.

¹⁶ Again these predicted probabilities refer to a male, Anglican, working class Protestant who has low education, was born in 1945 and never attends church, with the relevant mean values of left-right and unionist values.

¹⁷ In an article focusing on the political behaviour of evangelicals in Northern Ireland in 1991 and 1998, Mitchell and Tilley (2004) have argued that a third social cleavage has become important, a moral liberalism-conservatism dimension. We find that this appears to be a fleeting phenomenon though that is only apparent in 1998. For the four years (1991, 1995, 1998 and 2004) that a similar liberal-conservative value scale that can be constructed we find that it is a significant predictor of partisanship in only 1998, and does not affect the fundamental pattern of a waning left-right cleavage accompanied by a waxing constitutional cleavage. This can perhaps be explained by the transitional nature of politics in 1998, where uncertainty about the future prevailed and the consequences of institutional change were unclear. This is backed up by qualitative data that suggests that the most religious Protestants immediately after the Agreement dealt with uncertainty by emphasising religious rather than political dimensions of identity (Mitchell 2005; Ganiel 2006).

¹⁸ The predicted probabilities here come from model 3 and are for a 'standard' respondent, as defined previously, in 2004.