British Politics and Policy at LSE: Parties in Northern Ireland reach out beyond their core base under stable conditions but retreat to their ethnic constituencies in times of uncertainty

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*Drawing on semi-structured interviews with parties from Northern Ireland, **Cera Murtagh** and **Allison McCulloch** examine the extent to which dominant parties in Northern Ireland reach beyond their core ethnic constituencies, how they do that, and why. Their findings suggest that under favourable conditions, flexible power-sharing can create space for incremental moves by ethnic parties to reach out to constituencies beyond their core, gradually moving the system towards more inclusive representation.*

The year 2021 marks 100 years of Northern Ireland as a political entity. Yet, the future of that entity remains contested and far from certain. The region lies at a critical juncture both politically, and, one could even argue, existentially. In 2020, a prolonged political crisis was finally broken by the signing of the New Decade, New Approach Agreement. Power-sharing between unionists and nationalists – established through the 1998 Good Friday Agreement – was resuscitated after a three-year suspension. That suspension was the result of a mix of disputes between the power-sharing partners, particularly the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, and included the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal and contestation over Irish language, both of which unfolded against the backdrop of Brexit. The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, reconstituted in January 2020, were put to a sharp and sudden test just three months later with the onset of the COVID-19 crisis.

Now, after the UK's departure from the European Union on 31 December 2020, Northern Ireland finds itself in wholly unchartered territory. The economic and constitutional implications of the EU-UK Trade Deal and the Northern Ireland Protocol – which establishes a special position for the region, allowing it to remain simultaneously within the UK Customs Territory *and* the EU's Single Market and Customs Union – remain unknown. The impact of the new configuration on trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and the political contestation around it, are only beginning to play out. But with support for Irish reunification growing, debate over Northern Ireland's place in the Union is live and looking to remain so for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, the region continues to be hit hard by the pandemic and the governing parties have struggled to present a united policy response. Amidst this uncertainty, one reality is clear: Northern Ireland faces real and unprecedented challenges, in the face of which political leadership for all of its people is critical.

But do the parties at the helm of power-sharing governments govern for all? This question is the subject of sharp academic debate. One school of thought deems power-sharing inevitably polarising, working to institutionalise division whereby 'all politics is ethnic politics'. This scholarship calls out power-sharing as 'uninterested in the political status of those who do not belong to any of the significant segments'. As parties fight to carve out power for their own ethnic constituencies, the interests of others may fall through the cracks. A more optimistic approach assumes that over time, the peace and stability that flexible power-sharing arrangements provide will see politics gradually 'normalise': ethnic parties may start to compete for votes of the 'other' bloc and to mobilise on non-ethnonational issues such as the economy and social justice, and civic or non-ethnic parties may begin to win the favour of voters.

Our research tests the validity of these two competing perspectives by studying whether, how, and why dominant ethnic parties in Northern Ireland seek to reach out to voters beyond their own narrow ethno-national base. Dominant ethnic parties include those who represent the two recognised community designations in the Northern Ireland Assembly: nationalist (Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party) and unionist (Democratic Unionist Party and Ulster Unionist Party). While there is a third catch-all category for 'Others', parties with this designation often have less sway in the legislature. We interviewed representatives of nationalist, unionist and 'other' (civic) parties in the region, as well as members of civil society. These interviews were conducted in 2018 – thus before the COVID-19 crisis but at the height of the Brexit negotiations – offering key insights on 'reaching out' in power-sharing systems in both stable and unstable conditions.

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Our findings suggest a complex picture of reaching out. Parties acknowledged three main types of voter: those of the 'other side'; those who have recently arrived from outside Northern Ireland; and those from Northern Ireland who reject nationalist and unionist labels. They also reported various forms of engagement beyond their base, with moderate levels of policy engagement and constituency casework with these different kinds of voters, as well as some early but still low level of electoral appeal beyond their base. One DUP MP, for example, reported contact from 'conservative Catholics [who] would write and say, "Look, politically I don't have a home because the SDLP and Sinn Féin no longer represent my views… I want to let you know I'll be voting for you".'

Motivations for reaching out were also mixed. Parties clearly recognised that reaching out is a matter of principle: elected to represent all citizens in their constituency, it is a democratic duty to engage beyond their base. At the same time, their responses also betrayed strategic self-interest, whether because they were worried about changing demographics from the growing number of migrants to the region or the increasing number of citizens not aligned with either nationalism or unionism; or whether it was about their party's own survival amid flagging support within their traditional ethnic base; or whether about building majority support for their constitutional preference at a time of flux, either protecting the Union or Irish reunification.

The ten-year period between 2007-2017 witnessed encouraging signs that the system was starting to move from a more exclusive, ethno-national politics towards a more pluralistic, civic politics. That progress was upended, however, in the face of shocks to the system, suggesting that parties reach out beyond their base under stable conditions but retreat to their ethnic trenches in times of uncertainty and upheaval. As Northern Ireland continues to face a series of unprecedented struggles – containing the pandemic as well as the fallout from Brexit – now more than ever, the power-sharing partners need to put aside their differences and govern for all. Whatever its constitutional future holds, the need for parties to reach beyond their base will remain.

Note: the above draws on the authors' published work in the British Journal of Politics and International Relations.

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