

Party Competition in a Conflict State: Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Northern Ireland is a unique unit of analysis for academic study. Despite a history of conflict and civil war, it is nevertheless an open and free country, with a rich amount of data allowing researchers to study the effects of the conflict. This paper analyses party competition within Northern Ireland, arguing that party competition is differentiated across different arenas of competition, such as electoral or executive level. Looking deeper into the electoral level, the paper critically assesses two theoretical approaches to party competition. Using a range of data, the paper argues in favour of the 'ethnic tribune' model, whereby parties compete over who will be the 'strongest voice' for their chosen group.

Keywords: Party competition, party politics, conflict states, Northern Ireland.

Introduction

Literature on the Northern Irish party system and party competition within it is not extensive, and insufficient attempts have been made to explain the mechanics of party competition, particularly at the executive level or for smaller parties.¹ It is, nevertheless, theoretically rich and provides solid grounding for further analysis. This essay will examine party competition within Northern Ireland, arguing that real insight is lost when attempting to explain party competition in the Northern Irish

¹ There have been some rigorous empirical studies at the electoral level. In particular, see: Evans, G., and Mary Duffy (1997), *Beyond the Sectarian Divide: The Social Bases and Political Consequences of Nationalist and Unionist Party Competition in Northern Ireland*, *British Journal of Political Science*, 27(1), pp. 47-81; and for a more contemporary study, see: Tilley, J., Evans, G., and Mitchell, C. (2008), *Consociationalism and the Evolution of Political Cleavages in Northern Ireland, 1989-2004*, *British Journal of Political Science*, 38(4), pp. 699-717.

polity at large (Evans and Duffy, 1997). I also argue that party competition is differentiated amongst different arenas (Bardi and Mair, 2008). Looking into the electoral blocs, I assess two approaches to party competition in Northern Ireland, beginning by briefly setting the analysis in context. This paper then moves onto breaking down party competition by viewing the polity in its entirety, before delving deeper into the mechanics of party competition at an electoral level. I briefly view the effect of smaller, cross-communal parties, with focus on the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, before concluding.

Northern Ireland's Troubled Past

In 2007, Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party entered a power-sharing government together. This was previously deemed unthinkable. The Northern Irish conflict was seen as one of the most bitter and prolonged in any advanced democracy, and the paramilitary organisations that worked within it were some of the most well-armed in the world. Some scholarly work argued that the intensity and severity of the conflict meant it was best categorised as a war (Poole, 1995).

Despite the existing 'no war, no peace' situation (Ginty et al., 2007), the conflict has left its scar on Northern Irish society. The opposing sides of the conflict, pillarised along ethno-religious lines, operate within their own subcultures –each group has its own schools, newspapers and sporting organisations, and 90% of people live where their own confessional identity is the majority– (Ibid). Moreover, the fragile peace is still punctuated by sporadic violence and civil disturbance (Ibid)². This troubled history has left a marked effect on the political system. The remainder of the essay will explain party competition in this troubled environment.

Classifying the Northern Irish Political System

Following the work of Giovanni Sartori (1976, pp.43-4), a party system can be defined as 'the *system of interactions* resulting from inter-party competition'.³ Defining the party system helps narrow down the interactions of party competition.

² See, for example: McDonald, H. (2013). Northern Ireland Violence Brings Number of Police Injured to 350. *The Guardian*, 21st August. [Online] Available at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/aug/21/northern-ireland-police-injuries>>

³ For an interesting argument against and rebuttal in favour of Sartori's typology, see: Evans, J. (2002), In Defence of Sartori: Party System Change, Voter Preference Distributions and Other Competitive Incentives, *Party Politics*, 8(2), pp. 155-174.

Within this definition, I classify a party system based on the framework posited by Sartori, in which we look at party fragmentation and ideological distance on the assumption that differently structured party systems produce different interactions (Ibid, pp. 131-145; pp. 173-185). This is outlined in Figure 1 below (Ibid, p. 292). There are other methods to classify party systems in the literature⁴, but this seems like the most useful way to understand party competition *within* the classifications due to its theoretical expectations resulting from the party system.

Observing the data from recent elections, Northern Ireland can be characterised as a segmented multipartist polity, consisting of moderate fragmentation but containing parties which are ideologically similar. The key indicators of party fragmentation, the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP)⁵, and the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) are both between four and five as of 2011, with the ENEP slightly higher at 4.8 with ENPP at 4.2 indicating between four and five effective parties. This has remained fairly stable over time, with a spike for both in the 1998 election most likely due to it being the first election. There is a non-trivial amount of ideological polarisation, as can be seen from the data on the Northern Ireland Election Study. On a scale of 1-10, where the median voter is at 5.3, Sinn Fein are on the left at 2.2, whilst the Democratic Unionist Party are at 6.8. The Ulster Unionist Party is positioned at 6.9, whilst the Social Democratic Labour Party is at 2.8; polarisation within the blocs is clear.

This classification helps narrow down the structure of party competition. Most importantly, Sartori argues that this type of system has two characteristics of competition: bipolar coalitional configurations and centripetal competition (Sartori, 1976, p. 179). This model is well suited to Northern Ireland. Competition is segmented along two blocs, the Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists, in which there is little competition between the blocs –ethnic parties have captured 80% of the vote since the 1970s (Evans and Tonge, 2009). A simple model can predict that 98% of Catholic Nationalists will vote for their ethnic party, and 91% of Protestant Unionists will vote for their ethnic party (Ibid). Just 2% of Catholics support Unionist parties, whilst just 4% of Protestants back Nationalist parties (Ibid). One could be led to conclude that the explanatory power behind party competition in Northern Ireland is the ethno-religious cleavage.

⁴ Some simply count the number of parties, for example, or base it on ideological groupings.

⁵ This is given by the inverse of $1/\sum s_i^2$ where s_i represents seats (ENPP) or votes (ENEP).

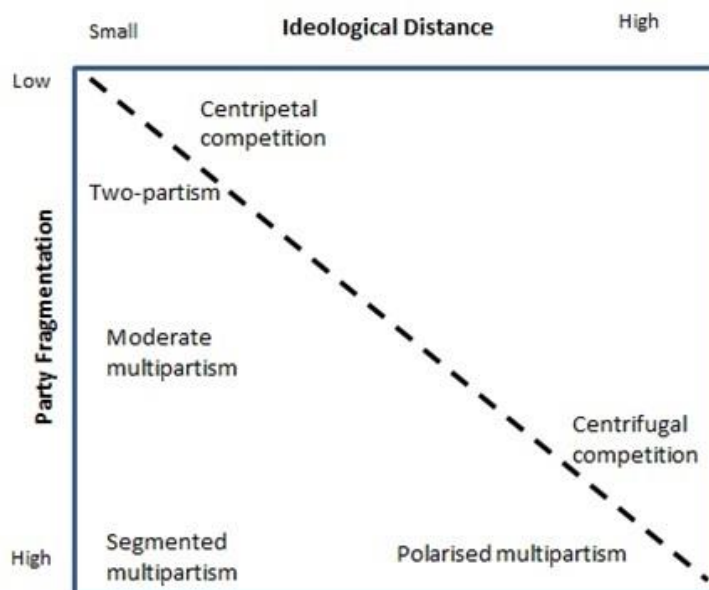


Figure 1: Sartori's Classification Figure of Party Systems (Sartori 1976)

Indeed some scholars have argued that the Catholic - Protestant cleavage is the *only* politically relevant cleavage in Northern Ireland (Bellof and Peele, 1985). But this approach fails to explain the majority of political phenomena in Northern Ireland. In particular, it does not explain why the main party in both blocs has changed hands (the DUP overtaking the UUP, and SF overtaking the SDLP). We cannot understand why the extreme parties have become the leaders whilst also moderating their policies.⁶ For this, political scientists must look within the blocs and analyse the system of party competition within them. Additionally, party competition is differentiated at the executive level as well. This is what Peter Mair and Luciano Bardi referred to as 'functional differentiation', where party competition varies across arenas (Bardi and Mair, 2008, p. 154).

Electoral Arena

Some scholars have argued that the dual bloc structure of party competition in Northern Ireland along with the almost non-existent inter-bloc competition means we cannot say that Northern

⁶ For a good, albeit now outdated, overview of how the parties became more centrist following the GFA, see: Mitchell, P., O'Leary, B., and Evans, G. (2001), Northern Ireland: Flanking Extremists Bite the Moderates and Emerge in Their Clothing, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 54(4), pp. 725-742

Ireland has ‘a’ party system (Ibid). The implication of such an analysis is that outcomes at the executive level are a result of party competition within blocs, rather than between them. It is useful to conceptualise this structure in a Venn diagram, with two independent circles intersected by a smaller one representing those parties which attempt to build cross-communal relations (Ibid). For the rest of this analysis, the Northern Irish party system will be said to be a dual-bloc party system, in which party competition occurs within the blocs rather than between them (Tilley et al., 2008; Coakley, 2008; Jefferson, 2011).

There has been a similar trend in both blocs, in which the more extreme parties in both become the primary parties amongst the blocs. This is depicted in Figure 2 presented below. Two approaches have been posited in the contemporary literature to explain these trends and how party competition has caused these outcomes.⁷ I will expand on both of these approaches before applying them to the different arenas. What both of these models try to explain is why the smaller parties, whom before the 1998 agreement would not have imagined of being the leading parties, now find themselves the leading party within their bloc.

The Spatial Approach

This approach typically relies on the traditional determinants of voting behaviour, but more precisely, it argues that voters identify themselves on a left-right continuum, and vote for the party closest to them, with social class being key (Adams et al., 2005). Control variables, primarily demographics, are also included in the model. In the case of Northern Ireland, however, this approach is given a caveat. In particular, exponents of this approach concede that these determinants are only ‘a conditioner of electoral choice *after* national identity and religious affiliation have effectively pre-determined the parameters of the voting choice’ (Evans and Tonge, 2009, p. 1020; McGarry and O’Leary, 1995). Whilst this suggests the predominance of the ethno-

⁷ It is out of the scope of this paper, but an interesting and more nuanced approach could be to look at the effect of party activists and supporters on the position of the parties. It may be that the general de-radicalising of members of Sinn Fein –by disassociating itself with the IRA– has contributed to its centrist position and the same to a lesser extent for the DUP. This could complement or contradict the ‘median voter’ hypothesis. See: Ezrow, L., De Vries, C., Steenbergen, M., and Edwards, E. (2010), Mean Voter Representation And Partisan Constituency Representation: Do Parties Respond To The Mean Voter Position Or To Their Supporters?, *Party Politics*, 17(3), pp. 275-301.

religious cleavage, class is important for voters deciding between parties which stand on similar constitutional platforms.

The Ethnic Tribune Approach

This model's key variable concerns which party is most effective in representing ethno-national interests (Mitchell et al., 2009). It suggests that the consociational arrangement since the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) has meant that voters look to their strongest voice in representing their views. Although this does not necessarily contradict the spatial model, they differ theoretically. The ethnic tribune model argues that voters look at policy outcomes, not just positions, and thus factor in the diluting effect of executive bargaining (Ibid; Orit, 2005). Moreover, it would predict that the most extreme parties benefit electorally, whilst the spatial model, by definition, would argue that parties nearest to the median voter would benefit (assuming a normal distribution of voters) (Downs, 1957). Both models therefore seem applicable. The question that remains, then, is which model has the most explanatory power?

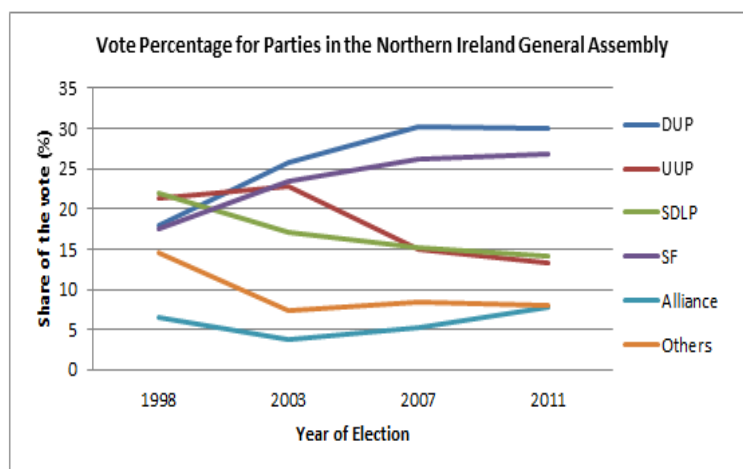


Figure 2: Vote share for parties in Northern Ireland Assembly

The Protestant-Unionist Bloc

Typically, competition between the Unionist parties has been how they place themselves on a spatial continuum, with left-right politics being particularly important. The DUP has taken a left-of-centre position on most issues, whilst the UUP has positioned itself on the conservative right (Evans and Tonge, 2009). Both parties seem cognisant of their social basis, with the DUP being

considered more a party of the working class compared to the middle-class credentials of the UUP (Ibid). What we have seen, as Evans and Tonge show, is a move away from class-based politics; there has been almost entire convergence on different social classes voting for the DUP –whilst the working class are still the most likely. The salariat, who in 1989 had almost zero probability of voting for the DUP, were now 40% likely to vote for the DUP (Ibid).⁸ This trend of voting behaviour could be due to the DUP pulling itself to the centre ground in an effort to capture the most votes, from a simple spatial approach, coupled with its strong constitutional stance on the GFA attracting former UUP voters.

However, this analysis is missing something. In particular, these parties were not much different on bread-and-butter issues in the first place, and it would be considered peculiar to see the DUP pick up votes simply by moving to the centre given that the UUP's position had not changed –in fact, they may have been punished. There would be no reason for the typical voters for the UUP to switch to the typically more extreme DUP whilst the UUP still offered policies closer to them *if* the left-right continuum was important. Public opinion was much more moderate during the DUP's rise (Mitchell et al., 2009), and some authors even predicted the inevitable break-up of the DUP as a result (McGarry and O'Leary, 1999). As Evans and Tonge (2009) point out, the loosening of structural constraints, such as class, does not account for the overall change in vote between the two parties, which could not be explained with the variables they included. The analysis is missing something that is motivating voters to switch parties and fuelling competition amongst the two parties.

The ethnic tribune approach explains party competition more succinctly. The authors of the paper extend figure 2 above back until the 1970s, and show that the GFA in 1998, and the run up to it, was the critical point for the rise of the DUP (Mitchell et al., 2009). Thus, they give institutional change key explanatory power. The diluting effect of power-sharing means that voters will want the strongest voice to represent them –and this, invariably, means the most extreme party. What the institutional change did was shift policy positions to policy outcomes. The UUP continued to campaign on spatial issues, which were no longer as relevant to the electorate; the parties were now competing on “relative perceptions of how *effective* each party was [...] in representing

⁸ Tilley et al. (2008) find similar trends.

ethnonational interests” (Ibid, p.411). Table 1 below shows how the electorate perceived each party (including the nationalist parties) (Ibid, p. 412).

Party ID	Voice for Nationalists (%)		Voice for Unionists (%)	
	SF	SDLP	DUP	UUP
Alliance	77	23	42	58
DUP	83	17	93	7
UUP	71	29	40	60
SDLP	53	47	41	59
SF	100	0	64	36
Other	81	19	59	41
Total	75	25	61	39

Table 1: Which party has been the most effective

The data from the table supports the claim made by the ethnic tribune model. The model helps predict, much more precisely, the switch in votes from the UUP to the DUP, and why the DUP are picking up votes from previous non-voters. Party competition in the Unionist bloc had moved from a focus on class voting and spatial issues to which party can best represent best the ethno-national interests. And the DUP have been rewarded for it.

The Catholic-Nationalist Bloc

Unlike in the Unionist bloc, spatial issues and class politics were never a fundamental part of party competition (Tilley et al., 2008). The constitutional issue offered a much more uni-dimensional structure of party competition even before the GFA. Nevertheless, the spatial approach can offer a good analysis of the rise of Sinn Fein and decline of the SDLP. In particular, there has been an unprecedented rise in middle-class voters voting for SF (Evans and Tonge, 2009). This is largely down to Sinn Fein moderating its views, such as disassociating itself with the IRA (a factor which has led to a large influx of young voters who do not remember SF’s association with political violence) (Ibid). Given demographic change, with a younger overall Catholic population, this explains some of the increase in SF’s vote compared to the SDLP (Mcallister, 2004). The problem for this thesis is that the divides were never as strong between SF and the SDLP as they were for the Unionist parties. Thus, competition was always centred on the constitutional divide.

As such, the ethnic tribune model is more effective in this case. Sinn Fein, by shifting to a more centrist agenda, appealed to a wider base of people who would have been turned off by its extreme politics (Evans and Tonge, 2009). Nonetheless, this only worked because of the institutional change, which allowed it to exploit its role as the tribune party, and made its move to the centre more credible. When competition moved from simply the constitutional issue, on which the parties were only divided on tactics, to which party would fight strongest for the bloc *on* constitutional issues, the only conceivable winner was the newly moderated Sinn Fein.

Minor parties

Despite the party system being an ethnic one, with the primary divide being the confessional cleavage, smaller parties have managed to garner some votes. Interestingly, even though the ethnic tribune approach, as defended above, argues for the hardening of the ethno-religious cleavage, and consociational theory also suggests theory suggests the divide will be more clear (Tilley et al., 2008; Dixon, 2002), the cross-communal Alliance Party has also gained in the last three elections, after a steady decline.⁹ This is illustrated in figure 2 above and in the cross-tabulation of vote share, outlined in table 2 below.

Party	Vote Share for Assembly Elections 1998-2011 (%)			
	1998	2003	2007	2011
DUP	18	25.7	30.1	30
UUP	21.3	22.7	14.9	13.2
SDLP	22	17	15.2	14.2
SF	17.6	23.5	26.2	26.9
Alliance	6.5	3.7	5.2	7.7
Others	14.6	7.4	8.4	8

Table 2:Vote Share for Parties in Assembly Elections 1998-2011

⁹ Such a decline, indeed, that Evans and Tonge predicted the APNI’s inevitable disappearance, which has not yet come to fruition. See: Evans, J., and Tonge, J. (2003), The Future of the “Radical Centre” in Northern Ireland After the Good Friday Agreement, *Political Studies*, 51(1), pp. 26-50.

There is sparse scholarship on the Alliance Party or smaller parties in Northern Ireland in general. Often, the Alliance Party captures those of no religious affiliation (Evans and Duffy, 1997). As such, one could argue that it competes in a different realm from the larger, confessional parties. There is no interaction between the larger parties and the smaller ones, specifically the Alliance, because it does not compete on the ethno-religious dimension. Rather, it aims to attract those who feel no allegiance to either side. Academic literature will need to deal with this substantial minority if it is to explain, completely, party competition.

Conclusion

The Northern Irish polity is characterised by a dual bloc system, in which party competition occurs within, rather than between, the two blocs. There are a few small parties, primarily the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, that are truly cross-communal, but these are electorally small. The essay looked at two different explanations for party competition within these blocs; one, which I called the spatial approach and the other, the ethnic tribune approach. The spatial model focuses on attitudinal and spatial drivers, whilst the ethnic tribune model argues that parties compete over which will be the strongest voice for its bloc. Although party competition is differentiated between the two blocs, the ethnic tribune model explains party competition better in both. There should be increased focus on the role institutional change has had to play in altering party competition within both the blocs, and the role cross-communal parties play in electoral strategy.

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