



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Information Service Research Paper

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# **An assessment of how electoral support for the five main political parties has changed since 1998**

**NIAR 150-16**

This Research Paper is an update of a previous paper (NIAR 487-11), which reviewed the electoral performance of the five main parties in Northern Ireland during the period 1969 to 2011. The present paper covers the period 1998 to 2016, and includes the recent Assembly Election. As the earlier paper contained considerable background material, particularly relating to the pre-1998 period, this paper should be read in conjunction with it. A report on the May 2016 (NIAR 146-16) election is also available.



## Executive Summary

- There are five main political parties in Northern Ireland, namely the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Sinn Féin (SF), Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Alliance Party.
- During the period 1969 – 1985, there were a number of key electoral milestones associated with the emergence, development and consolidation of the five-party system (see NIAR 487-11 for further details).
- The 1982 Assembly poll was the first occasion in which all five main parties contested an election.
- After the 1998 Assembly election, the rank order in terms of seats (and share of vote) was as follows: UUP, 28 seats (21.3% of first preference votes); SDLP, 24 seats (22%); DUP, 20 seats (18.1%); Sinn Féin, 18 seats (17.6%); and Alliance, 6 seats (6.5%).
- Between 2003 and 2016, a major political realignment took place in Northern Ireland. In broad terms, there was a significant shift away from the two parties most closely identified with the political settlement of 1998 (Belfast/Good Friday Agreement), namely the SDLP and the UUP. The chief beneficiaries were the DUP and Sinn Féin, while Alliance consolidated its position as the party of the centre and the smallest of the main parties.
- After the May 2016 Assembly poll, the rank order in terms of seats (and share of vote) was as follows: DUP, 38 seats (29.2%); Sinn Féin, 28 seats (24.0%); UUP, 16 seats (12.6%); SDLP, 12 seats (12.0%); and Alliance, 8 seats (7.0%).
- The nationalist share of the vote has steadily declined in recent elections.



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## 1 Introduction

This paper assesses how electoral support for the main political parties in Northern Ireland has changed since 1998, and shows how their fortunes have varied over the past eighteen years.

## 2 Electoral Performance of Main Parties, 1998 – 2016

There are currently five main parties in Northern Ireland, namely: the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Sinn Féin (SF), the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI). The electoral performance of each of them are reviewed in turn.

### 2.1 Democratic Unionist Party

The DUP evolved from the former Protestant Unionist Party, which was led by Dr Ian Paisley in the late 1960s. The party was founded in September 1971 by Dr Paisley and the then MP for Shankill, Desmond Boal. The new party, according to Boal, would be 'right wing in the sense of being strong on the Constitution, but to the left on social policies' (Elliot and Flackes, p. 225) <sup>1</sup>.

The party's first electoral success occurred in the 1973 local council poll, when it gained 4.3 per cent of the vote (21 seats). Four weeks later, this rose to 10.8 per cent (8 seats) in the Assembly elections of that year.

Chart 2.1 presents the DUP share of the vote in all council, Assembly and Westminster elections during the period 1998 – 2016. The chart illustrates the considerable advances made by the party since the Assembly election of 1998, when it gained 18.1 per cent of first preference votes.

Improvements in the electoral performance of the DUP has been most marked in Assembly elections, less so in local council and Westminster elections. In Assembly elections, the party's share of first preference votes has increased substantially, from 18.1 per cent (20 seats) in 1998 to 29.2 per cent (38 seats) in 2016. In local council elections, the DUP share of the vote has grown from 21.4 per cent (131 seats) in 2001 to 23.1 per cent (130 seats) in 2014. Their share of the vote in Westminster elections has moved from 22.5 per cent (8 seats) in 2001 to 25.7 per cent (8 seats) in 2015.

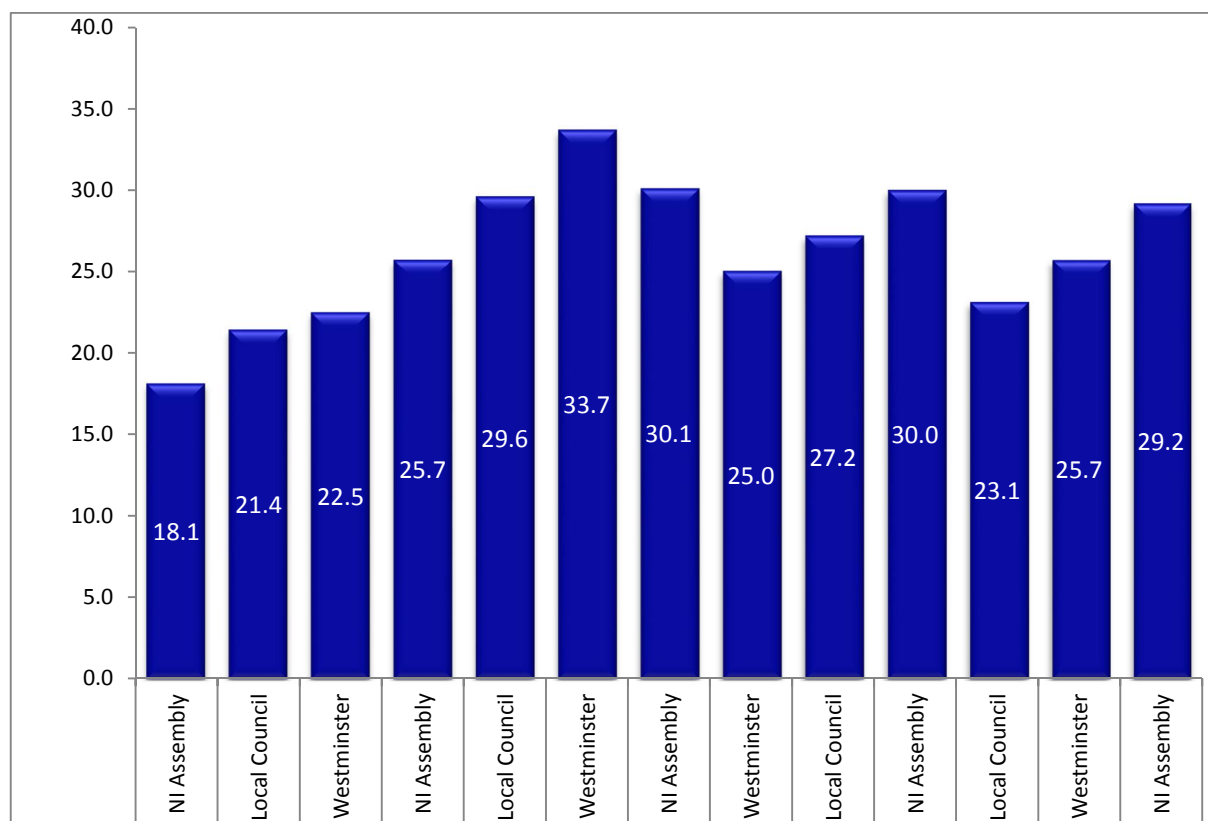
While the DUP has been the dominant party in Northern Ireland elections since 2003, it is notable that party performance has declined somewhat from a peak in 2011. As noted above, in local council elections, their electoral share has dropped from 27.2 per cent (175 seats) in 2011 to 23.1 per cent (130 seats) in 2014, while in Assembly

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot, S, and Flackes, WD (1998). **Northern Ireland: a political directory, 1968-1989**, 4th edition. Belfast: Blackstaff Press.

elections, the party's share has fallen slightly from 30 per cent in 2011 to 29.2 per cent in 2016.

**Chart 2.1 Electoral Performance (%) of DUP, 1998-2016**



Source: Electoral Office for Northern Ireland and BBC

## 2.2 Sinn Féin

Sinn Féin, which was founded in 1905 (the same year as the UUP), emerged as part of the opposition to Home Rule in Ireland. The party made its first major appearance in Irish electoral politics in the 1918 general election, when it achieved a substantial mandate, winning 73 out of 105 seats. However, after the Irish Civil War (1921 – 23), and the formation of Fianna Fáil in 1926, the party moved to the margins of Irish politics, largely vanishing as an electoral force<sup>2</sup>.

At the party's 1970 Ard Fheis (annual conference) a split occurred over a proposal to drop its policy of non-recognition of the Belfast and Dublin parliaments. Those against recognition called themselves the 'Provisionals' and walked out to set up their own

<sup>2</sup> McMahon, M (2008). **Government and Politics of Northern Ireland**,. 3rd edition. Newtownards: Colourpoint



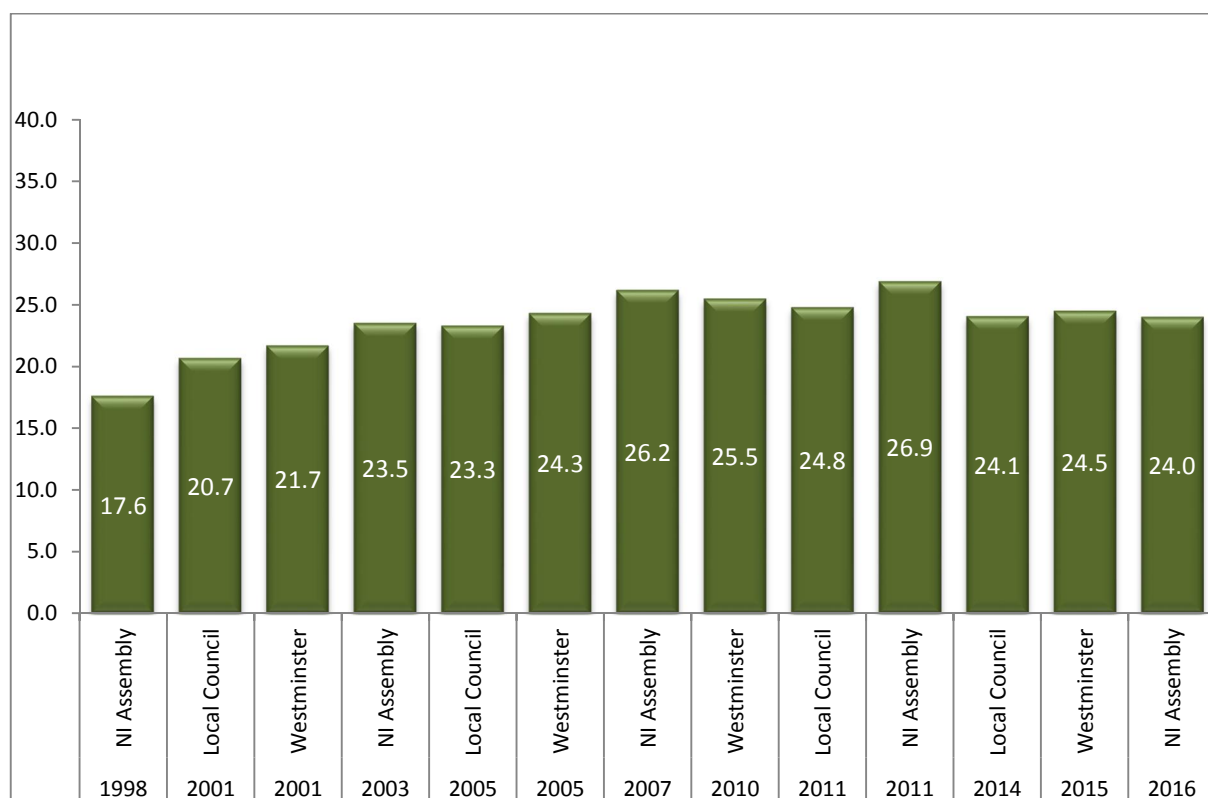
organisation. Provisional Sinn Féin were to become the political voice of the Provisional IRA (PIRA) <sup>3</sup>.

The election of Bobby Sands, an IRA Hunger Striker, in the Fermanagh – S. Tyrone Westminster by-election of April 1981, and other successes in the Irish General Election that year, provided an opportunity for the party to enter politics in Northern Ireland (it already held 30 local council seats in the Republic).

In the 1982 Assembly election the party achieved 10 per cent of the vote and won 5 seats, followed by 13.3 per cent in the 1984 European Parliament election. A significant breakthrough occurred in the 1985 local council election, when they secured fifty-nine seats and 11.8 per cent of the vote.

Chart 2.2 presents the Sinn Féin share of the vote in all council, Assembly and Westminster elections during the period 1998 – 2016. The chart illustrates the growth and consolidation of the party's vote over this period.

**Chart 2.2 Electoral Performance (%) of Sinn Féin, 1998-2016**



Source: Electoral Office for Northern Ireland and BBC

<sup>3</sup> Elliot, S and Flackes, WD (1998) Op. Cit.

In the 2001 local elections, the party won 20.7 per cent of the popular vote and 74 seats. By 2014, the figures had risen to 24.1 per cent and 105 seats. Similarly, the 1998 Assembly election saw the party with 17.6 per cent of the vote and 18 seats. By 2016, this had grown to 24.0 per cent and 28 seats. It has been argued that Sinn Féin became the 'key beneficiary of the new arrangements in Northern Ireland'<sup>4</sup>.

However, analogous to the DUP, the Sinn Féin share of the vote has declined from its peak in 2011. For example, in Assembly elections their share of first preference votes fell by 2.9 percentage points, from 26.9 per cent in 2011 to 24.0 in 2016, resulting in the net loss of one seat (to the People Before Profit Alliance). In local council elections, their vote share fell marginally, from 24.8 per cent in 2011 to 24.1 per cent in 2014, resulting in the loss of 33 seats (103) from 138 in 2011. Similar to the position of the DUP, only time (and more elections) will determine whether the recent decline in performance is a 'blip' or part of a longer-term trend.

### 2.3 Ulster Unionist Party

The UUP (also styled the *Unionist Party* or *Official Unionist Party*) was for many years the largest political entity in Northern Ireland and the traditional voice of constitutional unionism<sup>5</sup>. It provided the Government of Northern Ireland from 1921 until the imposition of direct rule in 1972. For most of this period, the party held around 40 of the 52 seats at Stormont (House of Commons) and at least ten of the 12 Westminster seats. Such was the unchallenged supremacy of the party, that some Unionist MPs never had to fight an election<sup>6</sup>. The origins of the party lie in the Home Rule crisis and the creation of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC), which held its first meeting on 3 March 1905.

Chart 2.3 (below) presents the UUP share of the vote in all council, Assembly and Westminster elections during the period 1998 – 2016<sup>7</sup>. The chart reveals that during this period the UUP gained its largest share of the vote between 1998 and 2001, reaching a peak of 26.8 per cent in the 2001 Westminster election. Party support steadily declined after 2003, reaching a low of 12.6 per cent (16 seats) in the 2016 Assembly election.

In the 1998 Assembly election, the UUP secured 21.3 per cent of the vote and 28 seats. The party slightly improved its share of the vote in 2003 (22.7 per cent) but lost one seat. In the 2007 election the UUP experienced a significant collapse in support, with the loss of nearly 54,000 first preference votes compared with 2003. Their share

<sup>4</sup> McMahon, M (2008). **Government and Politics of Northern Ireland**, p. 65. 3rd edition. Newtownards: Colourpoint.

<sup>5</sup> McMahon, M (2008). **Government and Politics of Northern Ireland**, 3rd edition. Newtownards: Colourpoint

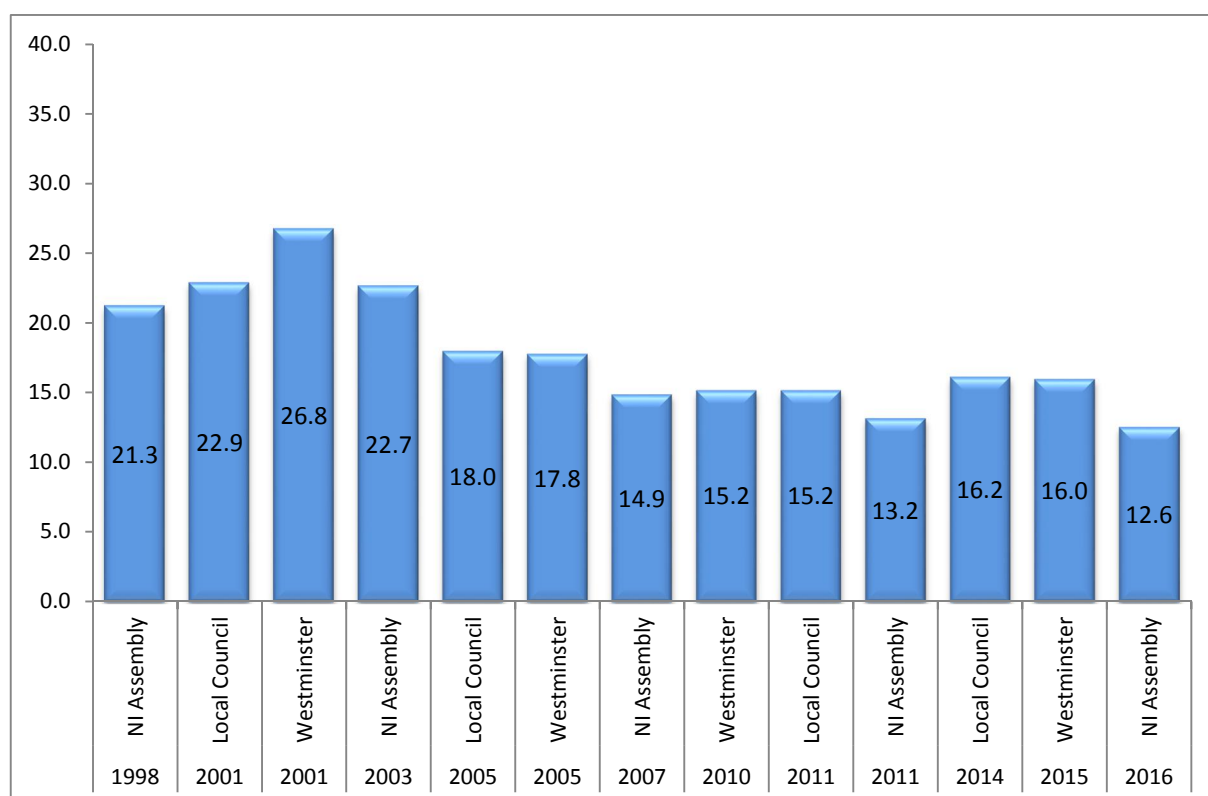
<sup>6</sup> Elliot, S and Flackes (1998) op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Elections to the European Parliament have been excluded from the analysis because for much of this period they produced strong personal votes for the DUP and SDLP candidates (Dr Ian Paisley and John Hume respectively). This had a distorting effect, particularly on the smaller parties, and therefore the results may not accurately reflect underlying party support at a given time.

of the vote also dropped to 14.9 per cent with a tally of 18 seats. In the May 2016 Assembly election, the party’s vote fell to 12.6 per cent, an historic low.

In local council elections, UUP support fell after 2001, when it secured 22.9 per cent of the vote (154 seats). In 2011, the party received only 15.2 per cent of first preferences and 99 seats, its worst performance since the re-organisation of local government in 1973<sup>8</sup>. However, the 2014 election saw a modest revival in UUP fortunes, with an increase in the popular vote (16.2%). This was not reflected, however, in the seat tally, which fell from 99 to 88.

**Chart 2.3 Electoral Performance (%) of UUP, 1998-2016**



Source: Electoral Office for Northern Ireland and BBC

## 2.4 Social Democratic and Labour Party

The SDLP was for many years the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland. Founded on 21 August 1970, it largely absorbed the old Nationalist party plus the National Democratic Party (NDP) and the Republican Labour Party. It was launched

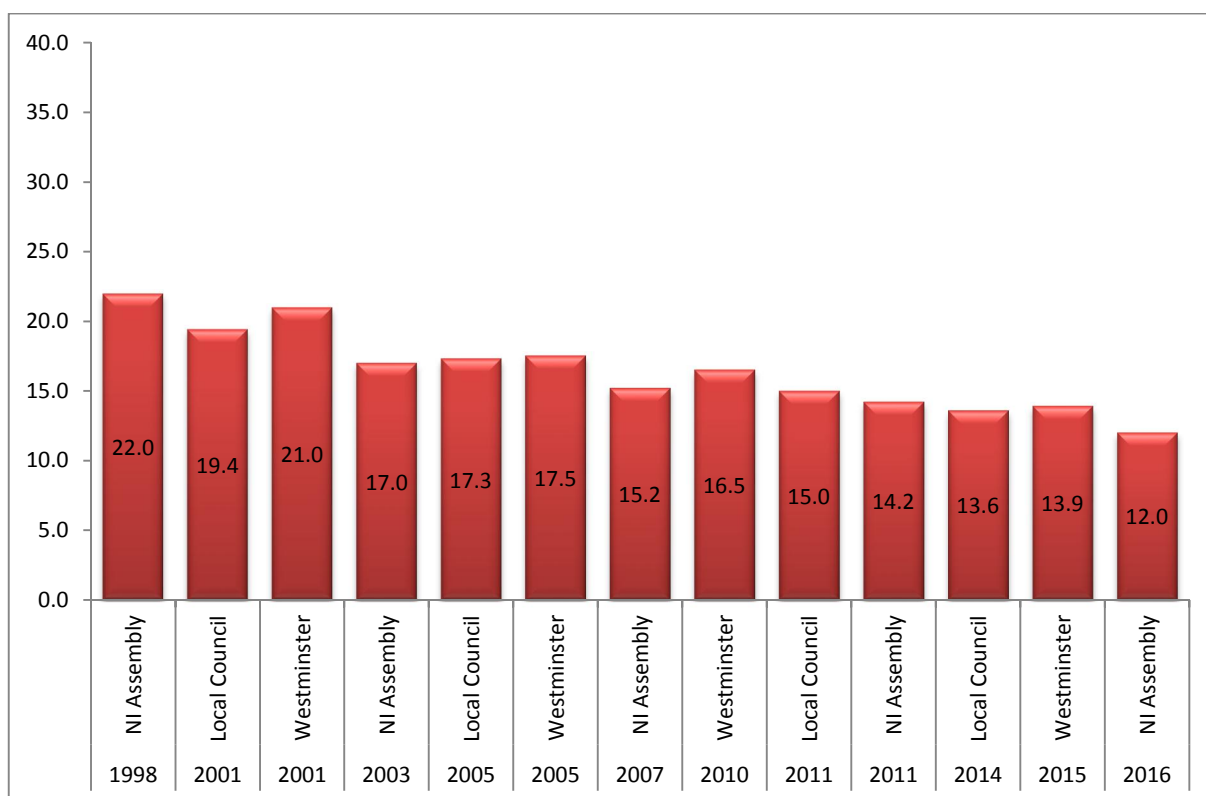
<sup>8</sup> The 1973 election provides a measure of how steep the decline in support for the UUP has been at local council elections. That year the UUP (labeled the Official Unionist Party) secured 286,112 votes (41.4 per cent) and 233 seats.

by seven Stormont MPs, including Gerry Fit, three Independent MPs (John Hume Ivan Cooper and Paddy O’Hanlon), Senator Paddy Wilson and Paddy Devlin, NILP MP.

Its first foray into electoral politics took place in the 1973 local council elections, when it won 13.4 per cent of the vote and 83 seats. Some weeks later, in the Assembly election of June 1973, the party received 22.1 per cent of the vote and 19 of the 78 seats. It had four seats in the 1974 power-sharing Executive, including that of deputy Chief Executive, held by Gerry Fit MP.

The collapse of the Executive in May 1974 was a serious blow to the party, and it was almost twenty-five years before the SDLP regained its former position as a key member of the Northern Ireland Executive.

**Chart 2.4 Electoral Performance (%) of SDLP, 1998-2016**



Source: Electoral Office for Northern Ireland and BBC

Chart 2.4 presents the SDLP share of the vote in all council, Assembly and Westminster elections during the period 1998 – 2016. The chart tracks the relative decline of the party in recent years. In Assembly polls, party support peaked in 1998 with 22 per cent of first preference votes and 24 seats. The SDLP position deteriorated at every subsequent Assembly election, falling to a low of 12.0 per cent (12 seats) in the 2016 ballot, which represented a net loss of two seats compared with 2011. With regard to local council elections, the party’s share of the vote fell in each of the four

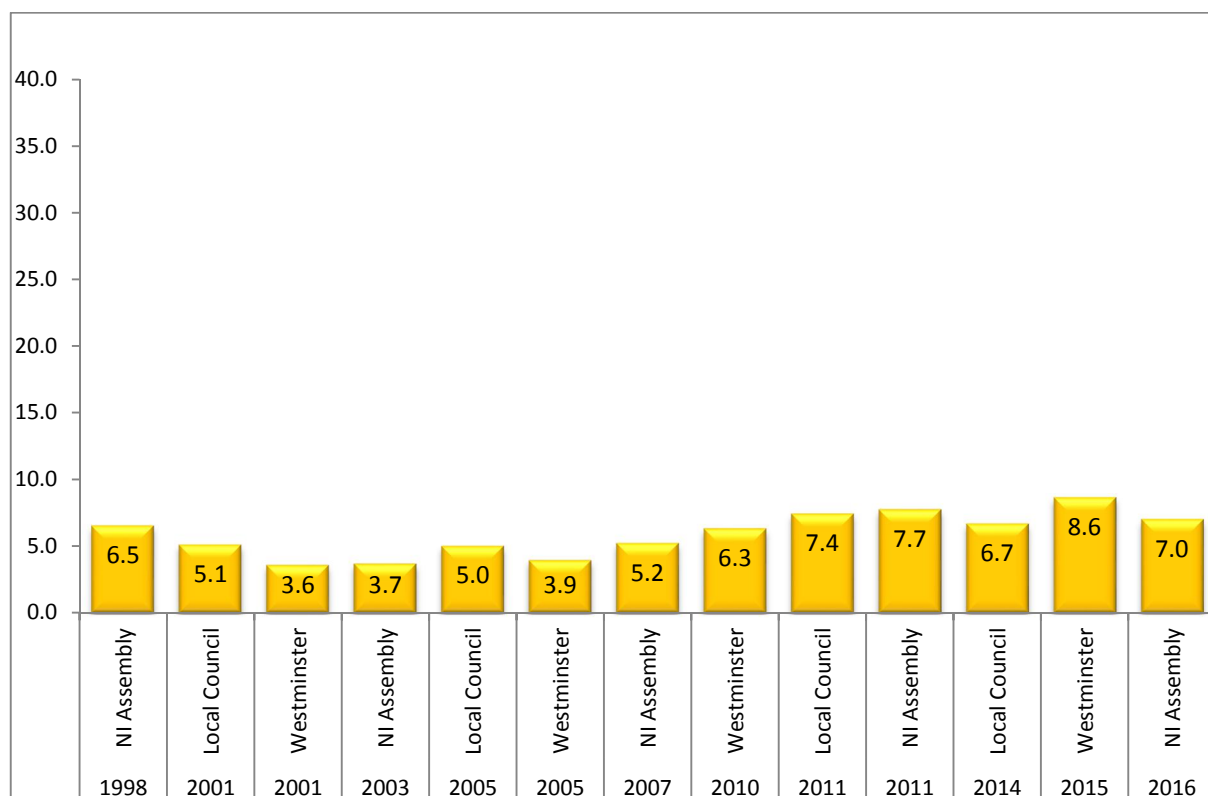
elections during this period, from 19.4 per cent (117 seats) in 2001 to 13.6 per cent (66 seats) in 2014. Their performance in Westminster elections also declined, from 21 per cent in 2001 to 16.5 per cent in 2010, reaching a low of 13.9 per cent of the vote in 2015.

## 2.5 Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

The Alliance Party is the smallest of the five main political parties in Northern Ireland. Alliance, which was launched in April 1970, is a party of the centre and attracts support from both sections of the community.

In its first electoral test (May 1973 local council elections), the party received 94,474 votes (13.7 per cent), its highest share ever recorded and 63 seats. In the Assembly election four weeks later, Alliance secured 9.2 per cent of the vote and 8 seats. The party subsequently took part in the Sunningdale Conference that year, which paved the way for the 1974 power-sharing agreement. Two of its members – Oliver Napier, the party leader, and Bob Cooper, the deputy leader – were Ministers in the ill-fated Executive until its fall in May 1974.

**Chart 2.5 Electoral Performance (%) of Alliance Party, 1998-2016**



The party lost ground in the 1980s. For example, in the 1985 local council elections Alliance largely became a party of the Greater Belfast area. It won 34 seats, four fewer

than in the 1981 election, and only 7.1 per cent of the vote compared with 8.9 per cent in 1981<sup>9</sup>.

Chart 2.5 (above) presents the Alliance Party share of the vote in all council, Assembly and Westminster elections during the period 1998 – 2016. During this period, party support ranged from a high of 8.6 per cent in the 2015 Westminster election to a low of 3.6 per cent in the 2001 Westminster poll. In the 2010 Westminster poll, Alliance gained its first ever seat with the election of Naomi Long to Belfast East.

In Assembly elections, the party secured 6.5 per cent of the vote (6 seats) in the 1998 election, falling to 3.7 per cent (6 seats) in the 2003 poll. In the 2007 and 2011 ballots, the Alliance vote recovered to 5.2 per cent and 7.7 per cent respectively, with an overall gain of two seats. In May 2016, the party maintained its position with 7 per cent of first preference votes and 8 seats .

The performance of Alliance in local council elections has followed a similar trajectory to that of the Assembly, with a dip in support in 2001 and 2005, followed by a slight recovery to 7.4 per cent (44 seats) in 2011. In the 2014 local council elections, Alliance received 6.7 per cent of first preferences and 32 seats – 12 less than in 2011.

Having outlined the changing electoral fortunes of the five parties since 1998, it may be helpful to draw attention to a further feature of recent elections – the decline in the nationalist share of the vote.

### 3 Nationalist Share of the Vote

Table 4.1 shows the combined Nationalist vote (Sinn Féin and SDLP) at all five Assembly elections since 1998 <sup>10</sup>.

**Table 4.1 Nationalist Share of Vote (%), Assembly elections, 1998 – 2016**

	SF		SDLP		Combined		Seats
	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	
1998	17.6	142,858	22.0	177,963	39.6	320,821	42
2003	23.5	162,758	17.0	117,547	40.5	280,305	42
2007	26.2	180,573	15.2	105,164	41.4	285,737	44
2011	26.9	178,224	14.2	94,286	41.1	272,508	43
2016	24.0	166,785	12.0	83,364	36.0	250,149	40

The table illustrates the substantial drop in the nationalist vote, from 320,821 in 1998 to 250,149 in 2016, a fall of 22 per cent. This is reflected both in the number of seats (down from 44 to 40) and the nationalist share of first preference votes (from a peak of

<sup>9</sup> Elliot, S. and Flackes, WD (1998) p. 157, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> It is beyond the scope of this Paper to discuss the reasons for the decline in the Nationalist vote in recent elections.

41.4% in 2007 to 36.0% in 2016). The nationalist vote also fell in the three election prior to 2016 – in the 2014 local council election (37.7%); the 2014 EU election (38.6%); and the 2015 Westminster election (38.4%).

The table also clearly shows the decline in the SDLP Assembly vote since 1998, which fell from 177,963 (24 seats) to a low of 83,364 (12 seats) in 2016, a drop of over half (53%).

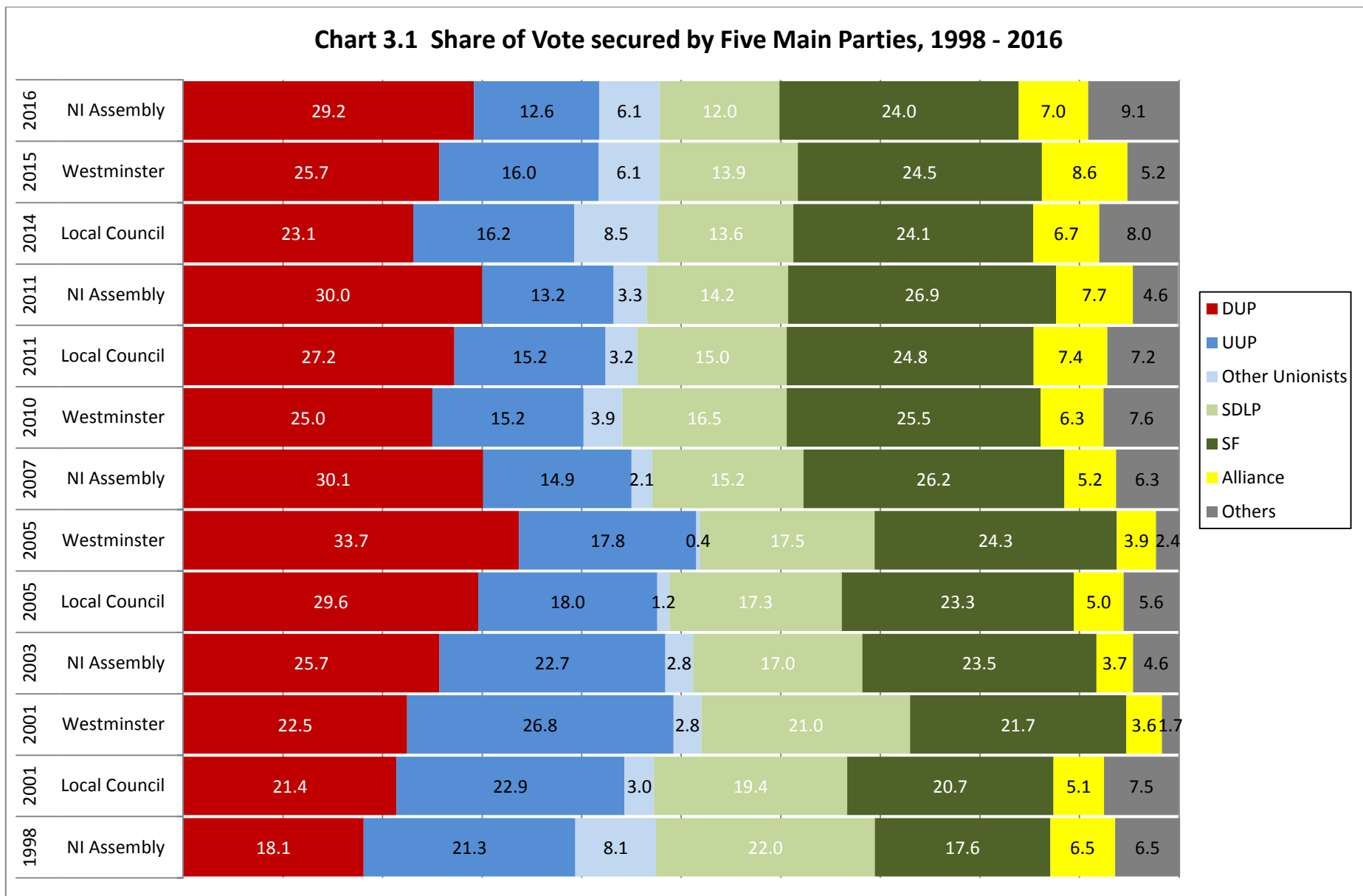
## 4 Summary

Chart 3.1 (below) illustrates the comparative performance of each of the five main parties in local council, Assembly and Westminster elections between 1998 and 2016.

The Chart highlights a number of key findings from this Paper, namely :

- Since 2003, the DUP has overtaken the UUP to become the largest party in the unionist bloc.
- Sinn Féin ousted the SDLP as the largest nationalist party after the 2001 local council elections.
- In Assembly elections, the UUP and SDLP share of the vote has fallen by around half since 1998.
- The Alliance Party has recovered from a slump between 2000 – 2010, and has consolidated its share of the vote in Assembly, local council, and Westminster elections.

Finally, as an aid to readers, Appendices 1 and 2 contain details of selected elections between 1969 and 2016.





## Appendices

### *Appendix 1: Share of Votes (%) by Main Parties and Others, 1969 – 2016 (selected elections)*

Year	Election	DUP	SF	UUP	SDLP	Alliance	Other Unionists	Others
1969	Stormont			48.2			19.1	32.7
1973	Local Council	4.3		41.4	13.4	13.7	10.9	16.4
1973	NI Assembly	10.8		29.3	22.1	9.2	21.9	6.6
1974	Westminster	8.2		32.3	22.4	3.2	23.7	10.2
1974	Westminster	8.5		36.5	22.0	6.4	17.1	9.6
1979	EU	29.8		21.9	24.6	6.8	7.3	9.6
1982	NI Assembly	23.0	10.1	29.7	18.8	9.3	5.7	3.4
1984	EU	33.6	13.3	21.5	22.1	5.0	2.9	1.6
1985	Local Council	24.3	11.8	29.5	17.8	7.1	3.1	6.4
1989	EU	29.9	9.1	22.2	25.5	5.2	4.8	3.2
1992	Westminster	13.1	10.0	34.8	23.5	8.7	8.1	1.7
1994	EU	29.2	9.9	23.8	28.9	4.1	1.0	3.1
1996	NI Forum	18.8	15.5	24.2	21.4	6.5	9.9	3.8
1997	Local Council	15.6	16.9	27.9	20.6	6.6	6.5	5.9
1997	Westminster	13.6	16.1	32.7	24.1	8.0	4.2	1.4
1998	NI Assembly	18.1	17.6	21.3	22.0	6.5	8.1	6.5
1999	EU	28.4	17.3	17.6	28.1	2.1	6.3	0.1
2001	Local Council	21.4	20.7	22.9	19.4	5.1	3.0	7.5
2001	Westminster	22.5	21.7	26.8	21.0	3.6	2.8	1.7
2003	NI Assembly	25.7	23.5	22.7	17.0	3.7	2.8	4.6
2004	EU	32.0	26.3	16.6	15.9			9.1
2005	Local Council	29.6	23.3	18.0	17.3	5.0	1.2	5.6
2005	Westminster	33.7	24.3	17.8	17.5	3.9	0.4	2.4
2007	NI Assembly	30.1	26.2	14.9	15.2	5.2	2.1	6.3
2009	EU	18.2	26.0	17.1	16.2	5.5	13.7	3.3
2010	Westminster	25.0	25.5	15.2	16.5	6.3	3.9	7.6
2011	Local Council	27.2	24.8	15.2	15.0	7.4	3.2	7.2
2011	NI Assembly	30.0	26.9	13.2	14.2	7.7	3.3	4.6
2014	Local Council	23.1	24.1	16.2	13.6	6.7	8.5	8.0
2014	EU	20.9	25.5	13.3	13.0	7.1	16.7	3.4
2015	Westminster	25.7	24.5	16.0	13.9	8.6	6.1	5.2
2016	NI Assembly	29.2	24.0	12.6	12.0	7.0	6.1	9.1

*Appendix 2: Number of Votes by Main Parties and Others, 1969 – 2016 (selected elections)*

Year	Election	DUP	SF	UUP	SDLP	Alliance	Other Unionists	Others	Total Valid Votes
1969	Stormont			269,501			107,043	182,543	559,087
1973	Local Council	29,610		286,112	92,600	94,474	75,160	113,023	690,979
1973	NI Assembly	78,228		211,362	159,773	66,541	158,356	47,981	722,241
1974	Westminster	58,656		232,103	160,437	22,660	170,245	73,525	717,626
1974	Westminster	59,451		256,065	154,193	44,644	120,388	67,353	702,094
1979	EU	170,688		125,169	140,622	39,026	41,910	54,824	572,239
1982	NI Assembly	145,528	64,191	188,277	118,891	58,851	36,033	21,349	633,120
1984	EU	230,251	91,476	147,169	151,399	34,046	20,092	10,884	685,317
1985	Local Council	155,297	75,686	188,497	113,967	45,394	19,712	41,069	639,622
1989	EU	160,110	48,914	118,785	136,335	27,905	25,789	16,973	534,811
1992	Westminster	103,039	78,291	273,335	184,445	68,665	63,913	13,435	785,123
1994	EU	163,246	55,215	133,459	161,992	23,157	5,583	17,215	559,867
1996	NI Forum	141,413	116,377	181,829	160,786	49,176	74,554	28,253	752,388
1997	Local Council	98,686	106,938	176,239	130,417	41,421	40,907	37,589	632,197
1997	Westminster	107,348	126,921	258,349	190,814	62,972	33,603	10,755	790,762
1998	NI Assembly	145,917	142,858	172,225	177,963	52,636	65,826	52,892	810,317
1999	EU	192,762	117,643	119,507	190,731	14,391	42,777	998	678,809
2001	Local Council	169,477	163,269	181,336	153,424	40,443	23,475	59,033	790,457
2001	Westminster	181,999	175,933	216,839	169,865	28,999	22,622	14,117	810,374
2003	NI Assembly	177,944	162,758	156,931	117,547	25,372	19,391	32,085	692,028
2004	EU	175,761	144,541	91,164	87,559			50,252	549,277
2005	Local Council	208,278	163,650	126,353	121,991	35,149	8,553	39,181	703,155
2005	Westminster	241,856	174,530	127,414	125,626	28,291	2,718	17,167	717,602
2007	NI Assembly	207,721	180,573	103,145	105,164	36,139	14,274	43,297	690,313
2009	EU	88,346	126,184	82,893	78,489	26,699	66,197	15,764	484,572
2010	Westminster	168,216	171,942	102,361	110,970	42,762	26,300	51,320	673,871
2011	NI Assembly	198,436	178,224	87,531	94,286	50,875	22,125	30,259	661,734
2014	Local Council	144,928	151,137	101,385	85,237	41,769	53,075	50,246	627,777
2014	EU	131,163	159,813	83,438	81,594	44,432	104,534	21,151	626,125
2015	Westminster	184,260	176,232	114,935	99,809	61,556	43,917	37,394	718,103
2016	NI Assembly	202,567	166,785	87,302	83,368	48,447	42,394	63,451	694,314