Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Erosion of Consent: Protestant Disillusionment with the 1998 Northern Ireland Agreement

BERNADETTE C. HAYES*, IAN MCALLISTER** & LIZANNE DOWDS***

*Department of Sociology, University of Aberdeen, UK, **Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, ***ARK, Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive, University of Ulster, UK

ABSTRACT   *Consociational solutions to communal conflict depend crucially on the consent of the participants to the new institutional arrangements. The most recent attempt to solve the Northern Ireland conflict, the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, initially attracted majority support from Protestants, but since then consent had steadily declined. All Protestant opponents of the Agreement share a strong underlying view that it unduly benefits nationalists at the expense of unionists. In addition, those who are generally disillusioned with the Agreement identify north-south bodies, reform of the police, and powersharing as major concerns. By contrast, those who were initially supportive of the Agreement but who have become disillusioned since 1998 identify the dysfunctional nature of the Assembly and Executive as a major cause of their dissent. The results suggest that Protestant consent for the Agreement will only return if and when the political institutions it created are seen to operate efficiently.*

Since 1972 there have been eight separate attempts to establish a devolved, power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. All have been loosely based on the notion of consociationalism – an association of communities – using a model pioneered by the Dutch in 1917 and subsequently adapted for Lebanon and Austria in the 1940s (Lijphart, 1977).[1] The most recent of the eight attempts at a settlement, the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement,[2] has produced a complex institutional architecture which contains many elements that transcend the simple notion of a 'grand coalition' that lies at the heart of the original idea of consociationalism. It has required the consent of national leaders, as well as community representatives, and concurrent majorities were required in different sovereign jurisdictions before it could be implemented (O'Leary, 1999).

Correspondence Address: Bernadette C. Hayes, Department of Sociology, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3QY, Scotland. E-mail: b.hayes@abdn.ac.uk.

The very complexity of the Agreement – through overlapping guarantees and vetoes, and external associations – has tended to obscure the most basic requirement of any consociational agreement: the consent of the conflict-prone communities for the institutional arrangements that will be used to govern them. Consociational theories assume that either political parties or group representatives will be able to deliver the consent their communities, thereby providing legitimacy for the new institutional arrangements. The Agreement assumes that group representatives will provide the appropriate levels of consent (Horowitz, 2002: 194-5). When the consent of a community is in doubt, then the legitimacy (and perhaps even the existence) of the institutional arrangements are themselves undermined. This is what has occurred in the Protestant community since the Agreement was formally ratified in the May 1998 referendum.

Although the 1998 referendum which ratified the Agreement produced consent from both communities, Protestant support for the principles of the Agreement has always remained fragile. Notwithstanding the continued ceasefire by the Irish Republic Army (IRA), many Protestants have interpreted post-1998 events as representing something less than the vision of political stability that they believed had been promised. This article outlines the levels of support for the Northern Ireland Agreement among Protestants in the period between the referendum in 1998 and the 2003 Assembly election, using the Northern Ireland Life and Times public opinion surveys. In addition, we analyse the causes of Protestant disillusionment with the Agreement, and its consequences for party support in the 2003 Assembly election.

The Troubled Road to Peace

Between 1972 and 1985 there were four failed attempts to establish a devolved, powersharing government in Northern Ireland (Byrne, 2000, 2001). All were premised on the notion that by marginalizing the political extremes, the new institutions through their success would demonstrate to the wider population the benefits of compromise, thereby starving the extremists of the popular support necessary to continue the violence (Horowitz, 2002: 193). Consociational solutions depend on political elites reaching an over-arching agreement and – most crucially – on those elites delivering the consent of their supporters for the settlement. But in each of the four attempts at a solution, either elite consent or popular consent was withheld (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995). Three of the four attempts failed because of the refusal of the constitutional nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) to participate. In the case of the only attempt where elite agreement was reached – the 1973–75 Sunningdale Agreement – the absence of popular consent was dramatically exposed in the May 1974 loyalist general strike which brought down the five-month-old powersharing executive.

The four attempts at a settlement that have taken place since 1985 have, in contrast to earlier attempts, been predicated on three assumptions. First, inclusive arrangements have been seen as having a better chance of success than efforts to exclude the extremists, particularly when they involve including the main loyalist

and republican paramilitary organizations. The inclusion of armed groups in govern-ment has always been controversial, particularly for unionists. The loyalist parami-litaries had themselves concluded as long ago as 1987 that Sinn Fein would have to be brought into any future government in order for it to have any chance of success, but general unionist acceptance of the principle took longer to achieve.[3] Such a position made it easier for the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) to agree to Sinn Fein's inclusion in the 1998 Agreement, though the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) rejected it. But even within the UUP it has remained controversial, particularly in the absence of conclusive evidence that the IRA has relinquished its military role.

For their part, republicans were also moving towards a position whereby they could agree to participate in government and achieve the transition from a mainly military to a mainly political organization (McAllister, 2004; McIntyre, 1995). While the 'ballot paper in one hand and the Armalite in other' strategy had brought significant electoral gains during the early 1980s, the modernizers within the party realized that there was no point in mobilizing mass electoral support only to be side-lined from the political negotiations that followed.[4] As a result, Sinn Fein's absten-tionist policy was formally rescinded at their 1986 conference, provoking a walkout by a small minority of delegates. The modernizers also understood that they had to open channels of communication with other political groups, and in 1988 Gerry Adams secretly met John Hume, an initiative that sowed the seeds of Sinn Fein's transition to a constitutional party (Murray, 1998: 161-86).

The second assumption underlying post-1985 thinking about the ingredients of a successful settlement was that the political elites who would be party to any agree-ment had to deliver the consent of their supporters – the very basis of all successful consociational solutions. In the case of the nationalist SDLP there was little doubt that their supporters would agree to a compromise, but both the British and Irish governments were concerned that a rapid transition towards an exclusively political strategy would split the republican movement and result in a return to violence by a traditionalist minority. This largely accounts for the 'slow and contradictory shifts in republican rhetoric' (Dixon, 2002: 728) as the IRA leadership attempted to sell participation in government to their supporters without resiling from the traditional goal of Irish unity.

Compared to republicans, delivering the consent of unionist supporters for any agreement represented another level of complexity altogether. Since the collapse of the devolved Northern Ireland parliament in 1972, successive schisms and disagree-ments over an appropriate strategy to return devolution to the province had weak-ened unionism. The collapse of the powersharing executive in 1974 in the face of what amounted to a loyalist rebellion, influenced the political outlook of several generations of unionist leaders, making them extremely suspicious of any form of compromise. But equally, there was also an awareness – shared by elites as well as supporters – that the divisions within unionism were undermining their bargaining power and continued fragmentation risked transforming the Protestant community into a political minority. There was also the fear that the longer it took to reach a settlement, the fewer the concessions unionism would win: 'every time unionism

walked away from the table, it was offered less than the time before' (Horowitz, 2002: 207; see also Aughey, 1989).

In many ways, the history of post-1998 unionism has been an attempt by unionist elites – particularly those within the UUP – to gain the consent of their supporters for a compromise with republicans. That consent was forthcoming at the time of the 1998 referendum, albeit narrowly, but has been eroded steadily by a number of factors, including the reluctance of republicans to make a binding commitment to democratic politics. As the UUP leader, David Trimble's complex role has been to remain formally committed to the Agreement, while at the same time preventing the consent of his supporters from dissipating completely, thereby destroying the legitimacy of the new institutions. In effect, the only way in which he has managed to maintain this delicate balance has been to withdraw periodically from the process, until republicans made further moves in relation to decommissioning.

The third assumption upon which post-1985 settlements have relied is that a consociational arrangement has to be coercive, by stipulating the inclusive nature of the new institutions as a precondition for their establishment (O'Leary, 1989; O'Leary and McGarry, 1993). Such a prescriptive approach to the composition of political institutions is based on the premise that voluntary consociationalism in divided societies is inherently difficult to achieve. Inevitably minorities seek guarantees for their position which complicate decision-making and risks immobilism. For their part, majorities wish to retain the right to rule on their own: 'It takes an unusual concatenation of circumstances to induce majorities to part with majority rule in favour of explicitly nonmajoritarian institutions of a consociational sort' (Horowitz, 2002: 197-8). The risk of such coercive arrangements is, of course, that when one party withdraws from the arrangement, the whole enterprise is placed in jeopardy. This is exactly what happened in three of the four suspensions of the Assembly and Executive between 1998 and 2003, when the Ulster Unionists withdrew from participation.

Designing Consociational Institutions

These three consociational principles – inclusion, consent and coercion – have been applied progressively to the various post-1985 attempts to devise a solution. The first attempt to apply them came in 1985 with the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA), which, for the first time, formally acknowledged that the Irish Republic had a legitimate role to play in Northern Ireland affairs (Arthur, 1999). Both the AIA and its immediate successor, the Trilateral Negotiations conducted in 1991, failed because of the opposition of the unionists to the involvement of the Irish government in Northern Ireland's internal affairs, thus failing the consent principle; indeed, following the announcement of the AIA, all 15 Unionist MPs immediately resigned their Westminster seats in protest, resulting in a series of by-elections which united unionists to defeat the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Moreover, the proposed settlements in both 1985 and 1991 excluded the paramilitaries, thereby failing the inclusion principle. The December 1993 Downing Street Declaration[5] did include one group

with strong paramilitary links, the Progressive Unionist Party, but not Sinn Fein, although both republican and loyalist paramilitary groups were choreographed to enter into ceasefires as part of the initiative (Dixon, 2002: 734).

The Downing Street Declaration eventually paved the way for the establishment of the Northern Ireland Forum and the start of all-party negotiations, which commenced in June 1996, presided over by a former member of the US Senate, George Mitchell. However, it was not until the election of the Blair Labour government in May 1997 that progress was made. In order to further the talks, the new government deliberately blurred the decommissioning issue, reasoning that the most divisive issues could be dealt with last. The talks finally concluded with the ratification of the Northern Ireland Agreement on 10 April 1998. The common theme underlying the Agreement is 'parity of esteem' – the principle of providing full expression to differing identities. In practice, this means that there is recognition for the political rights of both communities, and the freedom to express those rights in political institutions.[6]

The key parts of the Agreement have been characterized as reflecting 'constructive ambiguity', so that the key details 'could be interpreted in various ways to suit the receiving audience' (Dixon, 2002: 736). For unionists, the Agreement was portrayed as a means of cementing Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the United Kingdom, by delivering reform and as a consequence, bringing republicans into the political process and stopping the violence. This was a message that the British government emphasized continually to unionists (Dixon, 2001). For republicans, the Agreement was seen as a means of furthering the goal of Irish unity, this time by guaranteeing republicans a formal role in government, a process that they argued would eventually result in reconciling unionists to the inevitability of Irish unity (Mallie and McKittrick, 1997).

This 'constructive ambiguity', so vital in securing the consent of the main parties, has also been the Agreement's major weakness. The unionists believed that Sinn Fein's participation in the Agreement meant that they would disarm and become an exclusively political organization, garnering support through elections. By contrast, republicans believed that they had committed themselves to a phased disarmament, the pace of which would be determined by the degree of political progress that was achieved. The British government themselves suspended the Assembly and the Executive in February 2000 for four months when there was inadequate progress towards the decommissioning of paramilitary arms. In July 2001 Trimble resigned as first minister, also citing lack of progress on decommissioning, and only taking up his position again in November after General John de Chastelain, the Canadian head of an international commission set up to monitor decommissioning, said he had witnessed a 'significant' disposal of arms. Trimble again resigned in October 2002 after allegations that Sinn Fein was continuing to gather intelligence on potential military targets.

Trends in Public Opinion towards the Agreement

Given the political instability in the five years since 1998, it is hardly surprising that unionist opinion has exhibited a slow decline in support for the Agreement

and for the political institutions embodied in it. The referendum on the Agreement, held on 22 May 1998, was supported by 71.1% of voters in Northern Ireland, with 81.1% of voters turning out to vote. However, the overwhelming public endorsement of the Agreement masked major differences between the two communities. While Catholics were almost universally in favour, and during the course of the election campaign that level of support deviated little, Protestants were deeply divided. In the early stages of the campaign, positive media attention ensured favourable early reactions to the Agreement, but as more unionist leaders raised concerns, Protestant support declined markedly, to between 50 and 60%, even dropping to 52% just five days before polling day according to one survey. The 1998 Northern Ireland Referendum and Election Study found that 57% of Protestants voted for the Agreement, compared to 99% of Catholics (Hayes and McAllister, 2001: Table 2).

The 1998 referendum thus only narrowly produced majority support among Protestant voters; just two years later that support had declined to a minority. The surveys conducted since 1998 have shown that while the vast majority of Catholics continue to favour the Agreement, Protestant support has slowly eroded. The steepest decline took place in the two years immediately following the referendum; in
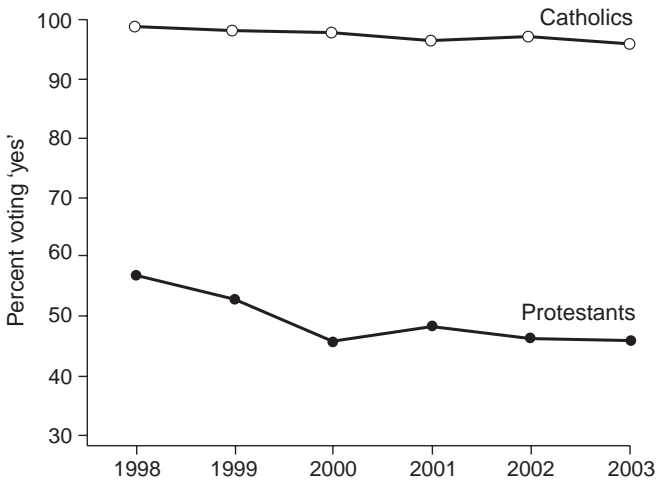

Figure 1.   'Yes' Vote if Agreement Referendum Repeated, 1998–2003.
Note: Estimates are % who say they would vote 'yes' and exclude non-voters and 'don't knows'. The question in 2000–2003 was: 'If the vote on the Good Friday Agreement was held again today, how would you vote?' In 1998 the question was: 'Talking to people, we found that some people did not manage to vote. How about you, did you manage to vote in the referendum?' and 'How did you vote?' In 1999 the question was: 'If the vote on the Good Friday Agreement was held again today would you still vote the same way that you did last May?' and 'How did you vote last May?'
Sources: Northern Ireland Referendum and Election Survey, 1998; Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys, 1999–2002; Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

1999 it stood at 53% and in 2000, at just 47%. Since then, less than half of the Protestants interviewed in the surveys have said that they would vote 'yes' if the referendum was repeated. In 2003, for example, 96% of Catholics and 46% of Protestants said they would vote 'yes' again; while this would deliver an overall 'yes' vote of about two-thirds of those turning out to vote, the popular legitimacy of the Agreement would be undermined since it would have failed to gain majority support in both communities.

The fragility of unionist support for the Agreement was always a matter of concern to the British and Irish governments. While a majority of Protestants voted for the Agreement in 1998, many of those who were prepared to give their consent were anything but firm in their views. The 1998 Referendum and Election Study found that about one quarter of Protestant voters had considered changing their vote during the course of the election campaign, compared to just 7% of Catholics. Similarly, 44% of Protestants said that they had decided on their vote during the last week of the campaign, compared to 16% of Catholics (Hayes and McAllister, 2001). Clearly, then, indecision and less than wholehearted support for the Agreement was an underlying characteristic of unionist support (Aughey, 2000).

What accounts for post-1998 Protestant disillusionment with the Agreement – or, perhaps more accurately, what occurred to alienate the lukewarm support that existed among a sizeable proportion of the unionist community? While the detailed answer to this question is examined in the next section, the short answer is easy: most Protestants believed, and continue to believe, that the Agreement disproportionately benefited nationalists, at the expense of unionists. When respondents are asked which community benefited most from the Agreement, or whether the benefits were equally shared, a large majority say that nationalists are the net beneficiaries of the Agreement. Figure 2 shows that, in 1998; 56% of Protestants believed that nationalists benefited most from the Agreement (40% saying that nationalists benefited 'a lot more', 16% 'a little more'). Just 1% of Protestants believed that unionists benefited more than nationalists.

Since 1998, the trend towards Protestants seeing nationalists as benefiting more from the Agreement has been increasing incrementally and by 2003 three quarters took this view. This increase has been at the expense of those who interpreted the Agreement as being of equal benefit to both communities, which has declined from 40% in 1998 to half that figure in 2003. These changes in Protestant opinion are substantial, and as we explain later, go a long way towards explaining Protestant disillusionment with the Northern Ireland Agreement. Even among Catholics, Figure 3 shows that very few believed that unionists had benefited more than they themselves had; most believed that the two communities were benefiting equally (66% in 2003) or that nationalists benefited more than unionists (26% in 2003).

Protestant disillusionment with the Agreement thus began almost as soon as the referendum was over; while the Agreement was supported by a narrow majority of Protestants, within two years that support had ebbed away to a minority, and if the referendum had been held again in late 2003, less than half of unionists would have been likely to support the Agreement. The firm view of Protestants was that
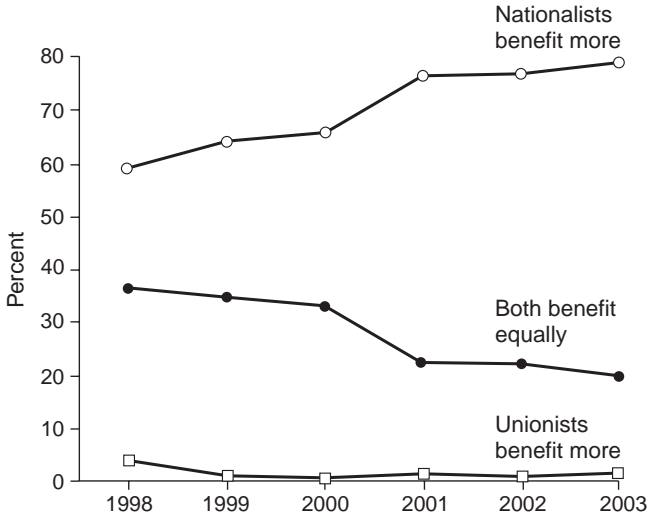
Figure 2.   Protestant Views About Community Benefits from the Agreement, 1998–2003.
Note: 'Thinking back to the Good Friday Agreement now, would you say that it has benefited
unionists more than nationalists, nationalists more than unionists, or that unionists and
nationalists have benefited equally?'
Sources: Northern Ireland Referendum and Election Study, 1998; Northern Ireland Life and
Times Surveys 1999–2002; Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

Figure 3.   Catholic Views About Community Benefits from the Agreement, 1998–2003.
Note: See Figure 2 for question wording.
Sources: Northern Ireland Referendum and Election Study 1998; Northern Ireland Life and
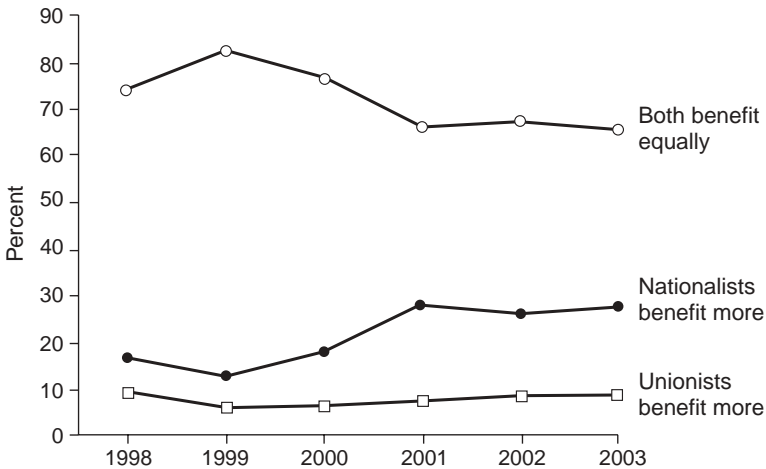Times Surveys, 1999-2002; Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

the Agreement disproportionately benefited Catholics, and that view has increased significantly since 1998. Only among Catholics did a majority believe that the Agreement was benefiting the two communities equally. The next section examines the sources of this increasing disillusionment with the Agreement among Protestants.

Explaining Protestant Disillusionment

As noted earlier, the Northern Ireland Agreement is based on the concept of 'parity of esteem' – the recognition of the political rights of both communities, and the freedom to express those rights in political institutions. Each of the three strands – the new political institutions, the north–south relationship, and the British–Irish relationship – represents a trade-off between unionist and nationalist aspirations. In return for nationalist demands for the creation of cross-border bodies, nationalists and republicans endorsed the return to devolved government and the creation of an elected assembly. To make the creation of cross-border bodies more acceptable to unionists, the north–south dimension was complemented by an east–west dimension via the establishment of a British–Irish Council. For nationalists, in return, the elected assembly was to be based on the principle of proportionality with a power-sharing executive composed of all groups within the assembly, chosen by the d'Hondt procedure.

Beyond the general feeling that the nationalists had gained considerably more from the Agreement than the unionists, what specific parts of the Agreement did Protestants object to? Of the six main aspects to the Agreement, the first part of Table 1 shows that in 1998, the north–south bodies were least popular, and supported by half of the respondents. Powersharing was also not as popular as other parts of the Agreement, gaining support from two-thirds of the respondents. At the other end of the scale, almost all Protestants supported the link with Britain and the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. There was, then, very divergent support within the Protestant community for the various components of the Agreement.[7]

The second column in Table 1 shows the proportion of respondents in the 2003 Northern Ireland Election Study who supported these same six aspects of the Agreement. While the general pattern of responses remains the same, there is substantially more support for powersharing – which increased by 15% – but less support for the Northern Ireland Assembly and for the removal of the Irish Republic's constitutional claim to Northern Ireland. Overall, the distributions of opinion among Protestants suggest that more support for some aspects of the Agreement is cancelled out by less support for others.[8] Clearly, though, the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons was, and remained, a major issue for Protestants.

In contrast to Protestants, Catholics show decreased support for all but two aspects of the Agreement. The largest change is a decline in support for the removal of the Republic's constitutional claim to Northern Ireland, from 48% to 27%. There is also an increase in support for decommissioning. Overall, Catholics see the most important principles of the Agreement as powersharing and decom-

Table 1.   Support for Principles of the Agreement, 1998–2003

	Protestant			Catholic		
	1998	2003	Change	1998	2003	Change
(% support)						
N Ireland remain part of UK	98	94	−4	75	72	−3
North-South bodies	50	51	+1	91	90	−1
N Ireland Assembly	83	78	−5	94	90	−4
Removal of claim to N Ireland	83	78	−5	48	27	−21
Decommissioning	95	98	+3	87	95	+8
Power-sharing	65	80	+15	93	96	+3

Note: 'Now I would like to ask you about your own views on some of the proposals contained in the Good Friday Agreement. Choosing your answer from this card (2003: 'Looking back at some of the proposals contained in the Good Friday Agreement), could you tell me how you feel about … the setting up of a NI Assembly … the requirement that the new Executive is power-sharing … the creation of North-South bodies … the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons … the removal of the Republic of Ireland's constitutional claim to Northern Ireland …the guarantee that NI will remain part of the UK as long as a majority of the people in NI wish it to be so.'
Sources: Northern Ireland Referendum and Election Study, 1998; Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

missioning, and the least popular the removal of the constitutional claim to Northern Ireland.

Reform of the police was a major issue for both communities at the time of the Agreement, but it remains so for Protestants even now, several years after the policy was implemented (Walker, 2001). In 1998, the establishment of a commission to review the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) was supported by just 37% of Protestants, with 23% taking a neutral view, and 40% opposing it. By contrast, 85% of Catholics supported the proposal.[9] The subsequent commission to review the police, under the chairmanship of Chris Patten, recommended wide-ranging changes, most of which were implemented. Although the substantial changes to the RUC that took place in the wake of the Patten Report have effectively removed it as an ongoing political issue, it still resonates with Protestants and is one of the components contributing to Protestant disillusionment with the Agreement. When asked if they believed that reform of the police had 'gone too far' or was 'about right', 53% of Protestants believed that it had 'gone too far', and only 35% that it was 'about right' (Figure 4). Conversely, a majority of Catholics believed that it had 'not gone far enough', with 42% saying it was about right.

To what extent did the two communities have views about what the Agreement foreshadowed for the constitutional future of Northern Ireland? Protestants were more likely to believe that the Agreement would eventually force them into a united Ireland; 46% took this view, compared to 38% who took the opposing view, with
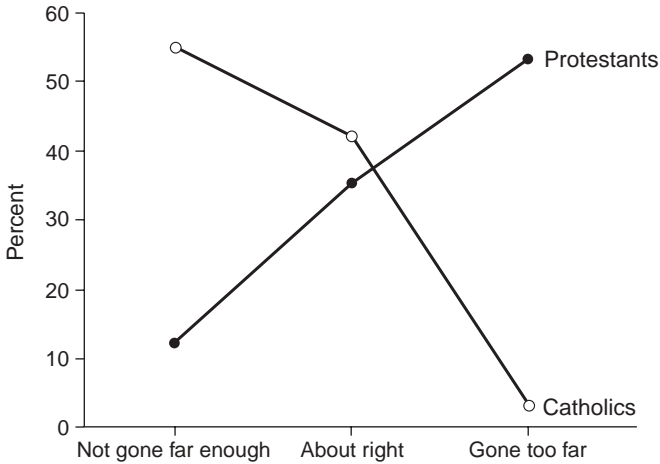
Figure 4.   Attitudes to Reform of the Police, 2003.
Note: 'Do you think that the reform of the police in Northern
Ireland has gone too far, has not gone far enough, or is it about right?'
Source: Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

the remaining 16% expressing neutrality (Table 2). By contrast, Catholics were
more evenly divided, with 37% agreeing with the statement and 34% disagreeing.
Similarly, Protestants were marginally less likely than Catholics – 38% as compared
to 39% – to take the view that the Agreement made it more likely that their position
as part of the UK had been made more secure. Overall, then, Protestants held a very

Table 2.   The Agreement and the Constitutional Future of Northern Ireland, 2003

	% agree	
	Prot	Cath
Everything that has happened since the Good Friday Agreement was signed makes it more likely that N Ireland will eventually join the Irish Republic	46	37
Everything that has happened since the Good Friday Agreement was signed makes it more likely that N Ireland will stay part of the UK	38	39
The experience of power sharing has meant that nationalists are now more content that N Ireland should remain part of the UK	30	44
The experience of power sharing has meant that one day a majority of unionists will agree to N Ireland joining the Irish Republic	8	16
(N)	(512)	(330)

Note: 'Still thinking about the Agreement, how much do you agree or disagree with each of
these statements?'
Source: Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

pessimistic view concerning the implications of the Agreement for the constitutional future, despite the fact that the Agreement firmly states that there will be no change in the constitutional position without 'the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.'

Nor do the Protestant respondents believe that the new powersharing institutions would significantly influence the constitutional aspirations of their nationalist counterparts. Table 2 shows that just three out of 10 agreed with the statement that powersharing had made nationalists more likely to want to remain in the UK, compared to 44% of Catholics. Just 8% of Protestants believed that powersharing would make unionists more likely to want to join the Irish Republic. There was, then, a strong element of cynicism among Protestants about the constitutional implications of the Agreement; more believed that it would steer them towards a united Ireland than allow them to remain as part of the UK, regardless of their preferences and the consent clause enshrined in the Agreement. In contrast, Catholics took a different view, seeing the Agreement as more likely to make their community want to remain in the UK.

Apart from the differing views of the institutional arrangements defined by the Agreement, there were also major differences in how the two communities interpreted the implications for the constitutional future. In reaching these interpretations, the Agreement itself was viewed as less important than how Protestants interpreted it in the context of events since the abolition of the Northern Ireland parliament in 1972. Many saw the various attempts to reach a solution as yet another stage in a process whereby the British government would edge them closer to a united Ireland. This view was certainly a major element in unionist reactions to the Anglo-Irish Agreement (Dixon, 2002), with the progressively more central role of the Irish government being seen as part of this process. The inclusion of Sinn Fein in the powersharing government established by the Agreement was viewed, once again, as another step down this path.

Explaining Protestant Disillusionment

How do we explain Protestant disillusionment with the Agreement? Which of the various aspects of the Agreement highlighted in the preceding sections were most important in mobilizing Protestants to oppose the Agreement? There are obviously different dimensions to Protestant opposition to the Agreement. One is simply those who, when asked how they would vote if the referendum were held again today, said 'no'. This is a useful measure of contemporary views about the Agreement and reflects a *general* sense of disillusionment. Table 3 shows that 44% of Protestants said that they would vote 'no' in this context, and 37% said they would vote 'yes'; if those in the 'other' category are excluded, 'no' voters represent 54% of eligible voters, and 'yes' voters 46%.[10]

The second dimension is to examine change in voting overtime, and to identify those who reported voting 'yes' in 1998, but by 2003 had changed their vote to 'no', and compare their views to consistent 'yes' voters. This is a measure of the *specific*

Table 3.   Aspects of the Referendum Vote, 2003

	Vote if held now			Votes in 1998, 2003	
	Prot	Cath		Prot	Cath
Yes	37	84	Consistent yes	30	76
No	44	4	Consistent no	23	1
Other	19	12	Yes to no	16	2
Total	100	100	No to yes	2	0.3
(N)	(535)	(355)	Other	29	21
			Total	100	100
			(N)	(535)	(355)

Note: See Figure 1 for question wordings. The 'other' category is non-voters, refused, don't know, and too young to vote in 1998.
Source: Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

disillusionment felt by former supporters of the Agreement. Table 3 shows that those who were consistent 'yes' voters were just three in 10 of all Protestants, with consistent 'no' voters making up just under one in four. Of those who changed their views, the vast majority – 16% compared to 2% – moved from 'yes' to 'no' rather than from 'no' to 'yes'. In theory this latter dimension provides a third possible contrast, but in practice the numbers are too small for reliable analysis.

These two contrasts – 'no' versus 'yes' voters, reflecting general disillusionment, and 'yes' to 'no' versus consistent 'yes', showing the disillusionment of early supporters of the Agreement – should help us to evaluate the relative importance of the differing explanations. Table 4 shows the results of two logistic regression equations, predicting these two contrasts among Protestant voters from the range of opinions outlined previously.[11] The results suggest that the two dimensions have different mainsprings within the Protestant electorate, with one exception: both sets of results show that the most important predictor in each equation is the belief that nationalists gained more benefit from the Agreement than unionists. This provides an important backdrop to all Protestant opinion about the Agreement, regardless of which of the two sets of contrasts we focus upon.

In terms of the general disillusionment with the Agreement evident among Protestants, besides the view that nationalists had benefited more than unionists, the first equation in Table 4 shows that opposition to the creation of north–south bodies in the Agreement was a major factor, followed by opposition to a powersharing assembly. Third in order of importance is opposition to the view that powersharing would make nationalists want Northern Ireland to remain as part of the UK followed by the belief that reform of the police had gone too far, and fourth, opposition to the view that powersharing would make unionists join the Irish Republic. This general sense of disillusionment therefore has a variety of sources, and is not focused on any one part of the peace process.

Table 4.   Explaining Protestant Disillusionment with the Agreement, 2003

	General		Specific	
	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)
Nationalists benefit more from Agreement	.67**	(.18)	.82**	(.28)
Agreement principles (support)				
N Ireland remain part of UK	−.02	(.23)	.11	(.37)
North-South bodies	−.55**	(.16)	−.20	(.22)
N Ireland Assembly	−.49*	(.21)	−.85**	(.31)
Removal of claim to N Ireland	.13	(.17)	.18	(.30)
Power-sharing	−.63**	(.22)	−.35	(.30)
Police reform gone too far	.44*	(.22)	.60*	(.31)
Constitutional future (agree)				
N Ireland join Irish Republic	.19	(.21)	.17	(.27)
N Ireland stay in UK	.01	(.21)	−.15	(.28)
Powersharing make nationalists stay in UK	−.52**	(.16)	−.48	(.23)
Powersharing make unionists join Irish Republic	−.29*	(.19)	−.38	(.31)
Constant	−9.67		−11.11	
R-squared	.327		.307	
(N)	(320)		(180)	

**statistically significant at p<.01, *p<.05.
Note: Equation 1 predicts current 'no' versus current 'yes' voters. Equation 2 predicts 'yes' in 1998 and 'no' in 2003 versus 'yes' voters in both 1998 and 2003. Both dependent variables are scored 0 or 1. The independent variables are all scored on five-point scales except police reform, which is a three-point scale. See Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1 and 2 for question wordings.
Source: Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

What motivated early Protestant supporters of the Agreement to become opponents? Aside from a general sense of unfairness in who benefits from the Agreement, two factors are important. First, opponents were motivated in their change by opposition to the Assembly though not, interestingly, to the principle of powersharing as such. Second, they believed that police reform had gone too far. It is notable that opposition to the principle of north–south bodies, which is so important in underpinning a general sense of Protestant disillusionment, is unimportant, and nor is there is any association with views about what the Agreement implies about the constitutional future.

These results provide an insight into changes in Protestant opinion towards the 1998 Northern Ireland Agreement. A common underlying theme among all of those opposed to the Agreement is the perceived unfairness of the new arrangements. But while general disillusionment has its origins in different aspects of the Agreement, those who have turned against the Agreement since 1998 clearly felt that the

Table 5. Protestant Views of the Assembly and Executive, 2003

	1998 and current referendum vote		
	Consistent yes	Yes to no	Consistent no
Suspension of Assembly and Executive 'mostly justified'	47	74	75
'Most blame' for suspension rests with Sinn Fein	34	53	52
'Very important' that both nationalists and unionists control some ministries	39	24	21
(N)	(162)	(85)	(124)

Note: Respondents are categorized according to their vote in the 1998 referendum and their vote if the referendum were held now. The questions were: 'The Northern Ireland Assembly and its Executive have been suspended four times over the last few years. How do you feel about these various suspensions? Would you say that they were mostly justified, or would you say that they were mostly unjustified?'; 'Different groups have been blamed for the suspensions of the Assembly and its Executive … which of these do you think should be blamed most?'; 'How important is it to you that both nationalists and unionists should have control of some ministries?'
Source: Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

Assembly had not performed adequately enough to retain their support. Table 5 sheds light on this aspect of public opinion by comparing three sets of Protestant voters in their views about the operation of the Assembly and the Executive. In each case, those who shifted from 'yes' to 'no' on the Agreement are almost identical in their opinions to consistent 'no' voters. For example, just over half in each case identify Sinn Fein as the cause of the suspension of the Assembly and Executive, compared to just over a one-third of consistent 'yes' voters. Similarly, almost three-quarters believe that the suspension was justified, compared to just under half of consistent 'yes' voters.

The dysfunctional operation of the Assembly and the Executive is therefore a major underlying cause of early supporters of the Agreement subsequently turning against it. If the political institutions created by the Agreement had operated as expected, we might have expected Protestant support for the Agreement to be maintained or, perhaps, to have declined slightly in response to opposition to reform of the police. The results presented here suggest that the four suspensions of the Assembly and Executive turned a significant minority of Protestants away from the Agreement in the five years since 1998.

The Electoral Consequences

The period between the formal devolution of power to the Northern Ireland Assembly in December 1999 and the November 2003 Assembly election was a turbulent one, even by the standards of Northern Ireland politics. The political debate was dominated

by the efforts of David Trimble, the UUP leader, to persuade his party to continue its support for the Agreement, in the absence of the failure of Sinn Fein to secure a complete decommissioning of arms by the IRA. During this period, the Assembly and the Executive were suspended four times, the last time in October 2002 when allegedly incriminating documents were discovered in Sinn Fein's offices. As a direct result of Trimble's continuing support for the Agreement in the absence of decommissioning, three of the party's six Westminster MPs resigned the party whip in June 2003.

The expected outcome of the November 2003 Assembly election was, therefore, a shift in unionist support towards the DUP, and in nationalist support towards Sinn Fein; the latter resulting from the lack of progress in implementing the Agreement and the perceived inability of the SDLP to promote the interests of nationalists.[12] This is what occurred on the nationalist side, with Sinn Fein increasing its share of the Assembly's 108 seats by six to 24, and its first preference vote from 17.6% in 1998 to 23.2% in 2003. Sinn Fein's rise was clearly at the expense of the SDLP, whose losses almost exactly mirrored Sinn Fein's gains. However, unionist voting patterns were more complex. The DUP did indeed emerge as the largest party, winning 30 of the 108 Assembly seats, an increase of 10 seats over its 1998 result, with an increase in its first preference vote from 7.2% to 25.3%. But the UUP did not experience the major defeat many had predicted. While the party lost two seats overall, reducing its total to 27 seats, its first preference vote was stable, at 22.4% compared to 22.5% in 1998.

What were the sources of the DUP's gains, given the UUP's stable vote and its only slight decrease in seats? Part of the answer is found in Table 6, which shows the turnover in the Protestant vote between the 1998 and 2003 elections. About two-thirds of the DUP's 2003 vote came from those who voted for the party in 1998, but

Table 6.   The Turnover of the Protestant Vote, 1998-2003

	Vote in 2003	
	DUP	UUP
Vote in 1998		
DUP	68	3
UUP	21	74
Other	5	16
Non-voter/too young	6	7
Total	100	100
(N)	(151)	(131)

Note: Vote is first preference vote. For 2003 vote, the respondents completed a mock ballot paper for their constituency, for 1998 the question was: 'Thinking back to the 1998 Assembly election, that is the one that took place in June 1998 to elect the first Northern Ireland Assembly. Can you tell me to which party you gave your first preference vote?'
Source: Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

an additional one in five of its 2003 voters came from previous UUP voters. In turn, the UUP defrayed these losses to the DUP by gaining 16% of its overall 2003 vote from those who had supported other minor unionist parties in 1998 – principally the UK Unionist Party, and to a lesser extent the Progressive Unionist Party. In other words, what appears to have happened is that while the DUP recruited former UUP voters, the UUP itself was able to defray defections to the DUP by attracting former UK Unionist Party and Progressive Unionist Party voters.[13]

What role did disillusionment with the Agreement play in shaping the vote for the DUP and UUP? Detailed analysis is difficult because of the relatively small numbers of survey respondents involved, but the indications are that a significant proportion of 1998 UUP voters who defected to the DUP in 2003 did so on the basis of their disillusionment with the Agreement. Table 7 shows that of the 1998 'yes' voters who subsequently became opponents of the Agreement, 47% voted for the DUP and 43% voted for the UUP in the 2003 Assembly election. By contrast, over one half of consistent 'yes' voters supported the UUP, and nearly three quarters of consistent 'no' voters supported the DUP. While the evidence is not conclusive, it does suggest that the shift in Protestant opinion against the Agreement was a very significant component in the rise of the DUP's overall vote in the 2003 Assembly election.

Table 7. Assembly Vote and Support for the Agreement Among Protestants, 2003

	Vote in 2003					
	DUP	UUP	Alliance	Other	Total	(N)
1998 and current referendum vote						
Consistent 'yes'	19	59	15	7	100	(107)
Consistent 'no'	73	21	0	6	100	(90)
Yes' to 'no'	47	43	0	10	100	(58)

Source: Northern Ireland Election Study, 2003.

Conclusion

By their very nature, consociational arrangements have at their heart the require-ment that the warring groups consent to the new institutional arrangements. The 1998 Northern Ireland Agreement, coming after eight previous unsuccessful attempts to resolve the conflict, has inevitably learnt the lessons of those failures. Based on three main assumptions – the inclusion of all groups, the consent of the two communities, and coercive participation in the new representative institutions – and depending on the bilateral agreement of two sovereign governments, the conso-ciational arrangements enshrined in the Agreement have perhaps been the most complex of their type ever attempted (Byrne, 2001). This complexity has been an advantage, in allowing different aspects to be presented to different groups in order to secure their support. But it has also been a disadvantage, in obscuring the crucial

importance of attracting and maintaining the consent of the parties to the new insti-
tutional arrangements (Bloomfield, 1996).

The history of the Northern Ireland Agreement since 1998 has been one of a
steady erosion of Protestant support, in the face of a dysfunctional devolved govern-
ment. At one level, the withdrawal of Protestant consent for the Agreement over the
past five years can be interpreted in the context of the difficulties of convincing a
majority to relinquish their political influence by entering into non-majoritarian
arrangements. That is reflected in the survey evidence, which shows a widespread
and growing belief that nationalists benefited more from the Agreement than union-
ists. However, although initial Protestant support for the Agreement was fragile, the
principle of powersharing seems to have been of less concern to unionists than the
decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and the establishment of north–south
institutions. In other words, there was a widespread (though hardly universal) accep-
tance among Protestants that any settlement would have to be based on inclusive,
coalition arrangements; the inevitable loss of political influence does not seem to
have been a major consideration.

At another level, declining Protestant support for the Agreement has been a conse-
quence of the failure of the new political institutions to bolster popular consent. The
results of the 2003 survey indicate that the dysfunctional operation of the Assembly
and Executive has been of more importance in eroding unionist consent than the
precise nature of those institutional arrangements. The new political institutions, if
they had been seen to have functioned in the manner of a consociational 'grand coali-
tion', might therefore have generated popular support for the Agreement and helped
to ameliorate communal conflict. Their failure to operate efficiently has been a major
underlying cause of Protestant disillusionment, most particularly among those who
voted 'yes' in the 1998 referendum but who would now vote 'no'.

Will the 1998 Agreement share the fate of its eight predecessors? The desultory
electoral performance of the UUP and the SDLP in the 2003 Assembly election, the
two parties most committed to the Agreement, and the parallel rise in support for the
DUP and Sinn Fein, would suggest a pessimistic outcome. However, three factors
would indicate that some efforts will be made to make the Agreement arrangements
work. First, there is no obvious alternative to the Agreement and devolved govern-
ment, other than direct rule from Britain, a policy that all of the major parties agree
is unsatisfactory. Second, it would appear that Sinn Fein is committed to electoral
methods, at least in the foreseeable future, and there is no obvious pressure to return
to its military campaign against the British government. And third, if the political
institutions can be made to work effectively, the results presented here suggest that a
sustained period of devolved government has the potential to generate the required
level of popular Protestant support for the Agreement.

Acknowledgements

Northern Ireland Election Survey was conducted by Roger McGinty, Bernadette C. Hayes, Geoffrey Evans, Paul Mitchell and Lizanne Dowds. Both surveys were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Earlier versions of the paper were delivered at the Elections, Parties and Public Opinion conference, Nuffield College Oxford, 10–12 September 2004, and at the 'Polls Apart' conference, Queen's University of Belfast, 22 September 2004.

Notes

1. The most recent application of the model has been in South Africa since 1993.
2. Originally labelled 'the Good Friday Agreement', it is now more commonly known by its secular title, 'the Belfast Agreement' or occasionally 'the Northern Ireland Agreement'.
3. In January 1987 a group aligned with the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) issued a strategy document called *Common Sense*, which advocated the return of devolved government to Northern Ireland, based on a model of shared responsibility in government (McMichael, 1999: 24).
4. This is effectively what occurred during the 1970s when IRA violence created the preconditions for major political change, but the SDLP took on the role of negotiating on behalf of the Catholic community.
5. The Downing Street Declaration set out the principles under which a peace process based on an inclusive dialogue between the various political parties in Northern Ireland could proceed. The Framework documents dealt with proposals for the internal governance of Northern Ireland (strand 1), relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and those between Ireland and Britain (strands 2 and 3). See Wilford (1999) for a comprehensive overview of the terms and proposals contained in the Framework documents.
6. See Ruane and Todd (1999), Cox, Guelke and Stephen (2000) and Wilford (2001) for comprehensive overviews of the terms and conditions of the Agreement.
7. In 1998 the early release of prisoners was a major issue, with 78% of Protestants opposing it, compared to 37% of Catholics. By 2003, the prisoners had been released and it was no longer a salient part of the Agreement components.
8. The overall change in support on the six principles was an increase of 5 percentage points among Protestants, and a decrease of 17 percentage points among Catholics.
9. Similarly, when asked if they were proud of the RUC, 51% of Protestants 'strongly agreed' with the statement, compared with just 13% of Catholics.
10. These are the estimates that are given in Figure 1. The larger proportion of Protestants than Catholics in the 'other' category reflects the fact that more Protestants said they would abstain or that they didn't know how they would vote.
11. The question on decommissioning is excluded from the analyses in Table 4 because 98% of Protestants supported it, and there is no variation in the responses, except whether they expressed 'strong support' or just 'support'.
12. Additional evidence from the 2003 Election Study provides support for this view. When asked 'which party do you think has been the *most* effective voice for nationalists in Northern Ireland?', 65% of Catholics choose Sinn Fein, compared to just 27% who mentioned the SDLP.
13. The UUP also lost previous voters to abstention. Of the UUP's 1998 vote, just 58% voted for the party again, 19% defected to the DUP, and 19% abstained.

References

Arthur, Paul (1999) Anglo-Irish Relations and Constitutional Policy, in: Paul Mitchell and Rick Wilford (eds) *Politics in Northern Ireland* (Colorado: Westview Press), pp. 242–264.

Aughey, Arthur (2000) The 1998 Agreement: Unionist Responses, in: Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen (eds), *A Farewell to Arms?: From "Long War" to Long Peace in Northern Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 62–76.

Aughey, Arthur (1989) *Under Siege: Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press).

Bloomfield, David (1996) *Peacemaking Strategies in Northern Ireland* (London: Macmillan).

Byrne, Sean (2000) Power Politics as Usual: Divided Islands and the Roles of External Ethno-Guarantors. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics,* 6, pp.1–24.

Byrne, Sean (2001) Consociational and Civil Society Approaches to Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Peace Research,* 38, pp.327–52.

Cox, Michael, Guelke, Adrian and Stephen, Fiona (eds) (2000) *A Farewell to Arms?: From 'Long War' to Long Peace in Northern Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

Dixon, Paul (2001) British Policy Towards Northern Ireland, 1969-2000: Continuity, Tactical Adjustment, and Inconsistent "Inconsistencies". *British Journal of Politics and International Relations,* 3, pp.340–68.

Dixon, Paul (2002) Political Skills or Lying and Manipulation? The Choreography of the Northern Ireland Peace Process. *Political Studies,* 50, pp.725–41.

Horowitz, Donald L. (2002) Explaining the Northern Ireland Agreement: The Sources of an Unlikely Constitutional Consensus. *British Journal of Political Science,* 32, pp.193–220.

Hayes, Bernadette C. and McAllister, Ian (2001) Who Voted for Peace? Public Support for the 1998 Northern Ireland Peace Agreement. *Irish Political Studies,* 16, pp.73–94.

Lijphart, Arend (1977) *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press).

McAllister, Ian. (2004) "The Armalite and the Ballot Box": Sinn Fein's Electoral Strategy in Northern Ireland. *Electoral Studies,* 23, pp.123–42.

McGarry, John and O'Leary, Brendan (1995) *Explaining Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell).

McIntyre, Anthony (1995) Modern Irish Republicanism: The Product of British State Strategies. *Irish Political Studies,* 10, pp.97–121.

McMichael, Gary (1999) *Ulster Voice: In Search of a Common Ground in Northern Ireland* (Colorado: Roberts Rinehart).

Mallie, Eamonn and McKittrick, David (1997) *The Fight for Peace: The Secret Story of the Irish Peace Process* (London: Mandarin).

Murray, Gerard (1998) *John Hume and the SDLP* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press).

O'Leary, Brendan (1989) Coercive Consociationalism in Northern Ireland. *Political Studies,* 37, pp. 562–88.

O'Leary, Brendan (1999) The Nature of the Agreement. *Fordham Journal of International Law,* 22, pp.1628–67.

O'Leary, Brendan and McGarry, John (1993) *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London: Athlone Press).

Ruane, Joseph and Todd, Jennifer (1999) The Belfast Agreement: Context, Content, Consequences, in: Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd (eds.), *After the Good Friday Agreement: Analysing Political Change in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press), pp. 1–29.

Walker, Clive (2001) The Patten Report and Post-Sovereignty Policing in Northern Ireland, in: Rick Wilford (ed.), *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 142–165.

Wilford, Rick (1999) Regional Assemblies and Parliament, in: Paul Mitchell and Rick Wilford (eds.), *Politics in Northern Ireland* (Colorado: Westview Press), pp. 117–41.

Wilford, Rick (ed.) (2001) *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Appendix

The 1998 Northern Ireland Referendum and Election Survey was a nationally representative post-election survey of all adults aged 18 years or older conducted immediately after the Northern Ireland assembly elections in June 1998. Using face-to-face interviews, the survey was based on a randomly selected sample of 948 respondents and had an overall response rate of 71%. The 1999–2002 Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys were nationally representative surveys of the Northern Ireland adult population conducted in the autumn of each year. Using face-to-face interviews, the surveys were based on a randomly selected sample of adults aged 18 years or over. The data are publicly available and can be downloaded at http://www.ark.ac.uk.nilt. The 2003 Northern Ireland Election Survey was a nationally representative post-election survey of all adults aged 18 years or older conducted immediately after the Northern Ireland assembly elections in November 2003. Using face-to-face interviews, the survey was based on a randomly selected sample of 1,000 respondents.