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Received through the CRS Web

Northern Ireland: The 2003 Election

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Summary

On November 26, 2003, voters in Northern Ireland went to the polls to elect a new Assembly, which has been suspended since 2002 because of ongoing difficulties in the peace process. Hardline political parties on both sides of the unionist-nationalist divide surpassed their more moderate rivals, dimming the prospects for restoring Belfast's devolved government soon. This report will not be updated. See also, CRS Report RS21333, *Northern Ireland: The Peace Process*, and CRS Report RL30368, *Northern Ireland: Implementation of the Peace Agreement during the 106th Congress*.

Background

Since 1969, over 3,200 people have died as a result of political violence in Northern Ireland, which is a part of the United Kingdom. The conflict, which has its origins in the 1921 division of Ireland, has reflected a struggle between different national, cultural, and religious identities.¹ The Protestant majority (56%) in Northern Ireland defines itself as British and largely supports continued incorporation in the UK (unionists); the Catholic minority (42%) considers itself Irish and many Catholics desire a united Ireland (nationalists). For years, the British and Irish governments sought to facilitate a political settlement. The Good Friday Agreement was finally reached on April 10, 1998. It calls for devolved government — the transfer of power from London to Belfast — and establishes a Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive Committee in which unionists and nationalists share power, a North-South Ministerial Council, and a British-Irish Council. It also contains provisions on decommissioning (disarmament), policing, human rights, and prisoners. The agreement recognizes that a change in the status of Northern Ireland can only come about with the consent of the majority of its people. Voters in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland approved the accord in referenda on May 22, 1998. Elections to the new Assembly took place on June 25, 1998.

¹ In 1921, the mostly Catholic, southern part of Ireland won independence from Britain. The resulting Republic of Ireland occupies about five-sixths of the island of Ireland; Northern Ireland occupies the remaining one-sixth.

Nonetheless, implementation of the peace agreement has been difficult, and sporadic violence from dissident groups continues. Instability in the devolved government has been the rule rather than the exception. Decommissioning and police reforms have been key sticking points, and a loss of trust on both sides of the conflict has caused the devolved government to be suspended since October 2002. Observers note that unionists remain skeptical of the IRA's commitment to non-violence, while nationalists worry about the pace of demilitarization, police reforms, and loyalist paramilitary activity.

Since the suspension of the devolved government, London and Dublin have led talks with Northern Ireland's political parties to try to find a way forward. Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, originally scheduled for May 1, 2003, were postponed by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair twice in order to give the parties more time to negotiate. On October 21, 2003, a deal to restore devolution appeared within reach and London announced that Assembly elections would be held on November 26, 2003. However, this deal failed to materialize when unionists criticized the IRA's lack of transparency regarding the quantity and type of arms disposed of in its third act of decommissioning. On October 28, 2003, London announced that the Assembly election would go ahead despite the continued suspension of the devolved government.

The 2003 Assembly Election

The November 26, 2003 election produced a significant shift in the balance of power in Northern Ireland politics. Reverend Ian Paisley's hardline Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which largely opposes the 1998 peace agreement, emerged as the largest party in the 108-member Assembly with 30 seats. It overtook the more moderate Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) as the dominant party among Protestant voters. The UUP, led by David Trimble, slipped one seat to 27. On the nationalist side, Sinn Fein — the political wing of the IRA — made significant electoral gains. Led by Gerry Adams, Sinn Fein surpassed the more centrist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) by six seats to become the leading party among Catholic voters. The non-sectarian Alliance Party held onto its six seats, while the remaining three went to two smaller unionist parties and an independent candidate.

2003 Assembly Election Results

Party	# of Seats	# of Seats +/- —	% of 1 st Preference Votes
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)	30	+10	26%
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)	27	-1	23%
Sinn Fein	24	+6	24%
Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)	18	-6	17%
Others	9	-9	10%

Source: "Northern Ireland Assembly Results," BBC News, November 28, 2003.

The results of the Assembly election were not completely unexpected. Over the last few years, the DUP and Sinn Fein have been gaining greater public support in their respective constituencies. In the June 2001 UK general and local elections, the DUP and Sinn Fein made substantial gains at the expense of the UUP and SDLP. Many unionists have grown increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of IRA decommissioning, despite what they view as repeated concessions to nationalists on issues ranging from establishing the power-sharing government to police reforms. Consequently, the DUP's hardline stance against sharing power with nationalists who refuse to give up their weapons resonated with many unionist voters in the Assembly elections. Some analysts contend that the divisions in the UUP between pro- and anti-agreement candidates may also have hurt the party's credibility with voters. As for the nationalists, Sinn Fein's success has been largely attributed to its evolution into a less militant but well-oiled and well-funded election machine that appeals especially to younger Catholic voters with less vivid memories of IRA violence. A number of observers also suggest that Sinn Fein has skillfully portrayed itself as the nationalist party that has won significant concessions from the UK on troop withdrawals and prisoner releases.²

Implications for the Peace Process

Most analysts assert that the outcome of the Assembly election will make restoring Belfast's devolved government difficult in the near term, and some foresee a prolonged stalemate.³ The DUP maintains that it will not negotiate directly, let alone go into government, with Sinn Fein as long as the IRA continues to exist and hold onto its weapons. Reverend Paisley has threatened to expel DUP members who talk to Sinn Fein. The DUP has also called for a re-negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement. The British and Irish governments have announced a review of the agreement to begin in January 2004, but insist that its "fundamental principles" — including power-sharing, the North-South institutions, and the principle of consent — are not open for discussion, and that the peace accord remains the only viable political framework.

London and Dublin admit that the election outcome poses increased challenges to reinstating Northern Ireland's power-sharing institutions, but stress that there is no sense that the political situation could lead to a security crisis. While UK officials concede that reaching a political deal between the DUP and Sinn Fein will not be easy, they remain hopeful that the lure of office will moderate the DUP and make it more willing to negotiate. Many analysts pin hopes for progress on the younger and more pragmatic DUP deputy leader Peter Robinson, who has stated that the DUP is prepared to work for lasting political stability in Northern Ireland and denied depictions of the DUP as a "wreckers" party. Others suggest that Robinson's room to maneuver will still be limited by Paisley's rhetoric and grip on the party. Some commentators predict that the DUP may eventually be willing to deal with Sinn Fein, but will stick with its hardline campaign until after the

² Glenn Frankel, "Election sets back accord in Northern Ireland," *Washington Post*, November 29, 2003; Garret FitzGerald, "Hope lies in inevitable evolution of DUP," *Irish Times*, November 29, 2003; "Time for Plan B in Northern Ireland," *Daily Telegraph*, November 29, 2003.

³ Commentators suggest that London and Dublin had long feared that the emergence of the DUP and Sinn Fein as the dominant parties would stymie the peace process, and this was a key reason why London especially had wanted to restore devolution before the Assembly election in the hopes that doing so would bolster the political fortunes of the UUP.

June 2004 European Parliament election and possibly the 2005 UK general election in the hopes of making further electoral gains against the UUP.⁴

Meanwhile, UUP leader David Trimble claims that the DUP won the election by selling a “false bill of goods” and that the UUP will bounce back. He stresses that the DUP will not be able to deliver an alternative solution for Northern Ireland’s unionists, and that this will become clear quickly. Trimble predicts that efforts to restore devolution will remain deadlocked, and hopes that unionists will return to the UUP once they realize that the IRA will not give up its arms for the DUP. He has suggested that London should call new elections in six months if the power-sharing institutions remain suspended. Trimble has also vowed to retain his post as party leader, despite calls from some anti-agreement UUP members for him to step down in light of the election outcome.

On the nationalist side, both Sinn Fein and the SDLP reject any attempts to renegotiate the Good Friday Agreement. Sinn Fein stresses that unlike the DUP, it is willing to engage in dialogue and to listen to the DUP’s concerns. Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams has also asserted that the DUP’s emergence as the dominant unionist party must not serve as a brake on implementing other aspects of the peace agreement, including continued police reforms, demilitarization, and equality and human rights measures.⁵

London and Dublin hope the upcoming review of the peace agreement will provide an opportunity to break the deadlock in the peace process. Commentators point out that the two governments have defined the peace accord’s “fundamental principles” broadly, thereby leaving the door open to some reforms that may help satisfy certain DUP demands. The DUP has asserted, however, that its participation in the review will depend on whether the review includes vital issues such as policing and north-south relations. Some press reports also speculate that the review could lead to changing the Assembly’s voting rules to allow the UUP and nationalist parties to form a devolved government without DUP approval. Others suggest this is unlikely because it would erode the principle of cross-community support and further isolate anti-agreement unionists.⁶

U.S. Perspectives

The Bush Administration continues to view the Good Friday Agreement as the best framework for a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. Top U.S. advisor for Northern Ireland, Ambassador Richard Haass, visited Belfast shortly after the election. He recognized that the poll reflected unionist frustration with the status quo, but asserted that he did not believe the peace process was in crisis. Haass stressed that any eventual changes to the peace agreement must respect its fundamental principles. Members of Congress also actively support the peace process and the full implementation of the agreement.

⁴ “NI political deal not easy,” BBC News, November 30, 2003; Gerry Moriarty, “DUP may wait for more gains before talking to Sinn Fein,” *Irish Times*, December 1, 2003.

⁵ “Paisley’s party tops NI poll,” BBC News, November 28, 2003; “Adams says Belfast Agreement cannot be subverted,” *Irish Times*, December 1, 2003; Frank Millar, “A crisis for the Agreement...and for unionism,” *Irish Times*, December 2, 2003.

⁶ John Murray Brown, “Deadlock spells more trouble at Stormont,” *Financial Times*, December 1, 2003; “DUP warning over review,” BBC News, December 6, 2003.

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