

# **Same but different? The Democratic Unionist Party and Ulster Unionist Party compared.**

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## **Abstract**

Northern Ireland's two main unionist parties, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) have undergone divergent fortunes since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) as the DUP has prospered whilst the UUP has struggled. This article draws upon recent studies of the memberships of both parties to explore their perceptions of the change in respective electoral standings and to examine the extent to which the parties now converge or differ in policies, membership composition and outlook. Examining three aspects in particular – identity, religious make-up and gender balance, we assess whether the two main unionist parties are largely similar or if significant intra-unionist differences are evident.

Keywords: unionism, unionist parties, identity, religion, gender, elections

## **Introduction**

The decades following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) have seen sharp intra-unionist rivalry, with the originally anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) eclipsing the one-time dominant Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). As the DUP rose, the UUP struggled. Amid UUP decline, there have even been talks about a merger, an idea resisted by UUP members. Both parties retain loyal memberships, with, perhaps surprisingly given recent misfortunes, the larger held by the UUP. But who belongs to these parties and what are the differences and similarities between their memberships? To answer these questions, this article draws upon the first-ever membership studies of both parties, containing quantitative and qualitative data and including interviews with the seven most recent leaders across the two parties, to compare the DUP and UUP.<sup>1</sup> It also uses recent Northern Ireland general election data to assess changing support bases.

## **The Good Friday Agreement: faultlines between unionist parties**

The GFA defined modern political unionism. David Trimble's decision to agree to its terms split his UUP and the wider unionist community, precipitating an electoral shift in which the Party, hegemonic in unionism since the early twentieth century, was displaced by Ian Paisley's DUP. Why did Trimble accept the GFA when it was clear elements of it, such as sharing power with Sinn Féin, paramilitary prisoner releases, no upfront IRA decommissioning and reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) were likely to cause upset in the unionist electorate?

Trimble concluded he achieved all his strategic objectives in the negotiations: there was no ‘constructive ambiguity’ on constitutional issues. The Agreement enshrined the principle of consent, confirming that Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK for as long as a majority within Northern Ireland’s confines so choose. The Irish Constitution’s territorial claim was removed and British legal sovereignty over Northern Ireland was conceded by the Irish government. The North-South institutions presented no prospect of an embryonic all-Ireland government by stealth. The Irish dimension was matched by a British-Irish equivalent in the form of the British Irish Council (BIC). The undisclosed elements of the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) were replaced by a British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference that was no longer secret to unionists. Finally, a new Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) restored some control to the region’s elected representatives giving unionists a say that they had been denied, effectively, since 1972 (Hennessey et al. 2019).

There were other dynamics at play: in 1998 Trimble worked on the basis that unionists would be blamed as the intransigent element preventing a deal, allowing the UK and Irish governments to ‘override the Unionist veto’. Trimble believed the UUP possessed a veto inside the talks; outside was ‘a different matter’ (interview, 30 June 2016). He also saw decommissioning and prisoner releases in cold logical terms. Trimble had always been agnostic on the value of decommissioning. He considered an Irish republican commitment to peaceful and democratic means could be evidenced through ‘a number of options’ such as ending punishment beatings (interview, 30 June 2016). However, Trimble found himself boxed in by decommissioning, as a litmus test of republican sincerity to ending their war, by many unionists. Equally, with prisoner releases, Trimble applied logic and looked to what happened when earlier armed republican campaigns ended and the release of IRA prisoners ensued

(interview, 30 June 2016). He thus was impervious to the outrage among his supporters on these issues when signing up to the GFA.

This proved costly when Trimble tested Sinn Féin's bona fides by entering government with them before prior IRA decommissioning of weapons. The internal disquiet within the UUP was exacerbated by the 'No Guns. No Government' slogan espoused by Trimble who, after declaring he would not enter government with Sinn Féin without IRA decommissioning, did exactly that without any republican paramilitary disarmament occurring. Danny Kennedy, a former UUP MLA, felt Trimble was seen to have gone back on his word, with severe consequences: 'We got nailed on it, absolutely, ... that was nearly the final straw that broke the camel's back, in that we couldn't achieve 'No guns, No government'... it was madness. The slogan became our Achilles heel' (interview, 28 January 2016).

Senior UUP figures, including Arlene Foster and Jeffrey Donaldson, jumped ship to the DUP in 2003. Donaldson's defection was not conditioned by concerns with the GFA's constitutional arrangements but because he saw no evidence the Sinn Féin leadership would use its best endeavours to bring about IRA decommissioning (interview, 8 March 2013). Foster shared these concerns and was frustrated by the chaos and lack of clarity within the UUP leadership (interview, 24 January 2013). The future UUP leader, Tom Elliott, while 'very strongly' in support of the UUP going into the multi-party talks, was a 'soft "no"' when it came to the referendum on the GFA. He believed there should have been a direct correlation between the release of prisoners and decommissioning (interview, 13 April 2016).

On top of prisoner releases and no decommissioning Reg Empey, a future UUP leader and Trimble's second in command during the multi-party talks, thought the 'policing stuff was the most difficult, and it did us the most damage' (interview, 30 June 2016). In particular, the RUC, with its title and cap badge of a crowned harp, represented the Britishness of Northern Ireland. The title change, to Police Service of Northern Ireland and the addition of more symbols reflective of the wider community, amid the Patten Report's reform of policing, were further blows to confidence in the UUP.. Ironically, given the lack of empathy displayed by Trimble on other issues, this angered him the most: he told Patten that if he [Patten] 'got the symbols wrong then he would foul up the whole process' (interview, 30 June 2016). Prisoners, decommissioning and police reform proved a perfect political storm that sunk the UUP.

The DUP's successful messages to win over unionists in the immediate post-GFA era were blunt and unsubtle. The party's 2001 Westminster election manifesto asserted that the UUP had supported 'terrorists in government; the RUC destroyed; murderers released ... Executive all-Ireland bodies set up' (Democratic Unionist Party 2001: 2). The UUP struggled to respond, its 2003 Assembly election manifesto assertion that 'Devolution worked because Ulster Unionists worked' curious given the Assembly had not sat for over a year (Ulster Unionist Party 2003: 2-3). Some of the DUP's criticisms were plain wrong: the description of the North-South Ministerial Council as a 'stand-alone all-Ireland government' (Democratic Unionist Party 2003: 19) was risible given its absence of executive authority but the DUP exploited unionist concerns.

The journey the DUP made, from total opposition to the 1998 deal to acquiescence, remains extraordinary. Ian Paisley opposed *everything* in the GFA, including the constitutional

elements which he regarded as a route to a united Ireland: the new NIA had a Nationalist ‘veto’; the ‘all-Ireland Ministerial Council’, with no unionist majority, could ‘take decisions’ on an island basis and therefore had executive power; the BIC was where the two Governments would continue to interfere in the affairs of Northern Ireland over the heads of its people; the repeal of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 ‘removed the title deeds’ of the United Kingdom's sovereignty over Northern Ireland’; the ‘illegal’ claims contained in the Irish Constitution would merely be amended; while the ‘so-called principle of consent’ provided that it was ‘for the people of the island of Ireland alone ... to exercise their right of self-determination’ (Paisley 1998: 22).

Yet in 2006 the DUP agreed to power-sharing in government with Sinn Féin at St Andrews. As the UUP (2007:1) asserted, the DUP ‘signed up to the fundamentals, framework and institutions of the Belfast Agreement of 1998’. How does one explain this extreme *volte face*? The DUP could not hope to replace an agreement endorsed by two governments and referendums in both jurisdictions. It could not be revoked but must be reformed in a process sold as ‘renegotiation’. This was to be undertaken via a series of ‘tests’: the executive to be fully accountable to the Assembly; only those committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means should exercise any Ministerial responsibility; any relationship with the Republic of Ireland must be fully accountable to the Assembly. The DUP would go into government with Sinn Féin once an Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) on paramilitary activity had confirmed, over six months, that paramilitarism and criminality by the IRA had ceased; decommissioning was complete; republicans accepted DUP changes to Strands One and Two of the Belfast Agreement and supported the police. Meanwhile, the DUP’s claims against the constitutional danger of the GFA proved unfounded.

The DUP strategy was to pressure Sinn Féin. Nigel Dodds, DUP deputy leader, became convinced republicans had ‘committed everything to this sort of internal Northern Ireland strand, this North/ South stuff which they made a lot of which is of course now not a big issue ... They had committed an awful lot. They couldn’t go anywhere else’ (interview, 3 July 2013).

Equally there were pressures exerted on the DUP, with Peter Hain, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, threatening a ‘Plan B’: Dodds say he ‘didn’t buy it at the time ... it was ludicrous in my view’ (interview, 3 July 2013). However, DUP leader, Peter Robinson, concluded Hain ‘certainly wasn’t bluffing ... If we hadn’t reached an agreement, we would have ended up with a much greener [pro-nationalist] form of direct rule ... The choices were either you are putting your hand on the steering wheel with the ability to put your foot on the brake or else you ... sit in the margins and watch them taking you without having any control.’ (interview, 25 June 2013).

The concessions secured by the DUP from republicans included (unquantified) decommissioning; the ending of the IRA campaign; and recognition of Northern Ireland’s policing and justice system. All of these would have been previously considered unattainable. Nevertheless, the prospect of sharing power with republicans was difficult for many DUP members. They rationalised entering government with Sinn Féin due to the personal trust built up, over decades, around the DUP leadership. The personal stock of Ian Paisley was decisive. Even those, such as the MLA Jim Wells, who detested sharing power with republicans – ‘those that I know have killed my kith and kin’ - acquiesced in the St Andrews Agreement because ‘the alternatives are much worse... it was the choice between a bad option and a worse option ... at least it gave the DUP some control over moral issues such as preventing the introduction of abortion’ (interview, 9 January 2013).

## Electoral competition between the two main unionist parties

By the time it undertook its major shift at St Andrews in 2006, the DUP had a big lead over the UUP, whose support for the GFA proved so highly damaging for its electoral fortunes. Given what had happened to the UUP, the DUP was taking a risk in concluding the St Andrews Agreement. In each of the four elections which followed, between 2009-11, the Party's vote share fell. However, the damage was minimal with the falls, 2009 European election apart, only slight. The most painful GFA medicine for unionists had been introduced by the UUP. Now, the IRA had left the stage and Sinn Féin was finally supporting policing. So the DUP's new dominance was not disturbed. Table 1 charts party fortunes.

**Table 1** DUP-UUP election performances 1997-2019

Westminster	UUP % vote	UUP seats	DUP % vote	DUP seats
1997	32.7	10	13.6	2
2001	26.8	6	22.5	5
2005	17.8	1	33.7	9
2010	15.2	0	25.0	8
2015	16.0	2	25.7	8
2017	10.3	0	36.0	10
Assembly				
1998	21.3	28	18.5	20
2003	22.7	27	25.7	30
2007	14.9	18	30.1	36
2011	13.2	16	30.0	38
2016	12.6	16	29.2	38
2017	12.9	10	28.1	28
Council				
1997	28.0	185	16.0	91
2001	21.0	154	23.0	131
2005	18.0	115	29.6	182
2011	15.2	99	27.2	175
2014	16.1	88	23.1	130
2019	14.0	75	24.1	122
European				
1999	17.6	1	28.4	1
2004	16.6	1	32.0	1
2009	17.1	1	18.2	1
2014	13.3	1	20.9	1
2019	9.3	0	21.8	1



Meanwhile the UUP could not recover from the GFA fallout. As its former minister and MLA Danny Kennedy put it, the deal ‘not only divided branches, in some cases, it divided families ... it’s our version of the Irish Civil War’ (interview, 28 January 2016). A lack of confidence within the UUP over its greatest achievement is evident. By 2017, only a slight majority of members, 53 per cent, said they would vote yes to the GFA in another referendum, less than the 59 per cent who backed the deal in 1998.

At the 2005 General Election, internal chaos, the collapse of political institutions and the failure of the IRA to have completed decommissioning led to disaster, as the UUP was reduced to one seat, with David Trimble ousted. A succession of new UUP leaders and floundering election strategies followed, as the DUP’s primary position in unionism became secure. The DUP consolidated this by changing the rules of election of the First Minister in the St Andrews Agreement, ensuring the largest party in the largest designation would fill the post. The DUP’s core election message was to make sure it remained the largest unionist party to prevent a Sinn Féin First Minister.

Trimble’s successor as UUP leader, Reg Empey, formed an alliance with the Conservative Party for the 2010 General Election, clumsily entitled the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists New Force, UCUNF. Most UUP members, 67 per cent, feel closest to the Conservatives, compared to miniscule sympathy for other parties at Westminster, (although 19 per cent of UUP members say they do not feel close to any British-wide party) so the link appeared logical but such was the electorate’s rejection of the UUP at the time that it made little difference. Empey, wanted to better integrate the UUP within UK politics via UCUNF. The UUP also attempted to exploit disquiet over the DUP’s remarkable u-turn in the St Andrews Agreement Yet with

the UUP's solitary remaining MP, Sylvia Hermon, opposed to the Conservative link and quitting, the only impact of UCUNF was to end the UUP's Westminster representation.

Empey's successor as leader, Tom Elliott, struggled to exert authority over a party whose constituency associations guarded their autonomy. He admitted he was 'really struggling to gain support and respect in the Greater Belfast area, whether elected reps, our associations or the party members' (interview, 13 April 2016). After Elliott's departure, the election of Mike Nesbitt as UUP leader in March 2012 indicated the possible advent of a new liberal unionism to distinguish the UUP from the DUP. Nesbitt had only joined the UUP in 2010 and was its first leader to not belong to the Orange Order. He insisted: 'I don't want to be a super-Prod, I want to be a super Unionist' (*News Letter*, 2 April 2012). Nesbitt's mantra was 'Country First, Party Second, Individual Third'.

The UUP regained Westminster representation, capturing two seats in the 2015 general election. It left the Northern Ireland Executive to join a cross-community opposition at Stormont. Yet the 2015 UUP mini-revival was aided by pan-unionist electoral pacts and the DUP's switch of leader from Peter Robinson to Arlene Foster in January 2016 forestalled UUP hopes of resurgence. Untypical of her party, which prior to her elevation was only 27 per cent female and 28 per cent Church of Ireland, yet sharing its robustness, Foster's transcended traditional DUP-UUP boundaries. The UUP's vote share fell at the 2016 Assembly elections, and the DUP now led by 125,000 votes. The DUP return of 38 seats matched its 2011 haul, with 86 per cent of DUP candidates elected compared to 62 per cent of those fielded by the UUP.

Under Nesbitt, the UUP attempted to straddle the sectarian divide, inviting the SDLP leader, Colum Eastwood, to address its 2016 conference. Nesbitt urged people to ‘vote Mike, get Colum; Vote Colum, Get Mike’, the first explicit cross-community voting exhortation heard from a UUP leader. Any slim chance of convincing sceptics of the value of a cross-community electoral approach, based on outreach and vote transfers across the divide, disappeared in the fevered atmosphere of the snap 2017 Assembly election, fought amid rows over Sinn Féin’s withdrawal from the Executive, the Renewable Heating Scheme and an Irish Language Act. With the Assembly reduced from 108 to 90 members, the DUP lost 10 seats. Yet although unionism’s majority disappeared for the first time, the DUP’s share of the unionist vote held steady. The UUP lost six MLAs, Nesbitt blamed for having urged UUP voters to straddle the sectarian divide rather than stress unionist unity via lower preference transfers to unionist candidates. Nesbitt resigned, his overarching liberal unionist project having failed,

Whilst the DUP had been consistent – vote DUP, get DUP - the UUP had flirted with the Conservatives, DUP and SDLP within a seven-year election cycle. Robin Swann became the new party leader. His Orange credentials could reassure the UUP faithful of a return to more traditionalist offerings but worse soon followed. Three months after the Assembly contest, at the 2017 Westminster election, the DUP recaptured the one seat lost to the UUP two years earlier and Sinn Féin retook the UUP’s other 2015 gain. As the DUP enjoyed a record return of 10 MPs, held the balance of power at Westminster and demanded £1 billion of extra funding for Northern Ireland as the price for supporting the Conservative government in key parliamentary votes, the UUP was left bereft. Further reverses followed two years later. The UUP vote share fell in the local elections, the DUP winning most seats. Then the UUP lost the European Parliament seat it had held since the first such contest in 1979 – to Alliance, which appeared to be attracting those liberal unionists Mike Nesbitt had attempted to entice.

## **Separation or merger?**

As recent Northern Ireland general election studies have shown (Tonge et al. 2010; 2015; 2017) the DUP's electoral dominance of the unionist community extends across numerous demographic categories, including social class, gender and age, although the lead over the UUP diminishes among unionists aged over 65, socialised during UUP dominance. The UUP struggles to dispel images of an organisation whose best years are behind it, an ageing party struggling for relevance. Only one-in-three 18-24 year-olds voted in the 2017 Westminster election but of that one-third, 32 per cent voted DUP, whereas the UUP attracted a mere nine per cent (Tonge 2017). Repeated UUP election reverses have raised the possibility of merger with the DUP and informal discussions took place between 2009-12, but only 15 per cent of UUP members support the idea. The membership is amenable only to tactical electoral pacts with the DUP. The current UUP leader has ruled out merger because unionists are 'not a homogenous group that go in one direction ... if we'd one party tomorrow, we'd probably have three on Wednesday' (*News Letter*, 19 October 2017). Yet the main difference between the two parties appears to be their histories not policies. Carving a niche to appeal to the unionist electorate is difficult given that, as one former UUP elected representative put it, 'the DUP ... have become more like us, and we've stayed pretty much the same' (interview with Jeff Dudgeon, 20 May 2016).

The EU referendum saw the DUP back Leave, but by 2016, the UUP had become persuaded of the economic case for Northern Ireland's place in the EU. Given that Northern Ireland voted to remain by 56 to 44 per cent, the UUP could claim to be in tune with public opinion. Yet whereas the DUP was in tune with its voters, 70 per cent of whom voted to leave the EU, the UUP's backing for Remain was not matched by its members or supporters. More than half (58

per cent) of UUP voters supported Brexit in the 2016 referendum (Garry 2016; Garry and Coakley 2016).; 54 per cent of members voted likewise (Hennessey et al. 2019). There was little evidence of regret among UUP supporters: almost twelve months later, at the 2017 Westminster election, 63 per cent of the UUP's supporters believed it was right to leave the EU. The UUP leadership view thus failed to carry the voter or membership bases and the party quickly changed to a pro-Brexit position, territory occupied by the DUP. This unconvincing approach was followed by the party's worst-ever election performance in the 2019 European Parliament elections, reduced to a single figure percentage vote share for the first time and losing its seat.

There remains a sense of anger among many within the UUP that they were punished for political risk-taking in the GFA whilst the DUP prospered by condemning, then accepting, those risks. Constructive, liberal but constitutionally robust unionism may be the only way forward for the UUP but the Alliance Party, whilst rejecting the label of 'unionist', is tapping that market. Both the DUP and UUP have static pools of support, in that Catholic backing for, and membership of, either is negligible. DUP dominance and fortunate parliamentary arithmetic greatly bolstered the party's broader relevance in 2017. As the DUP successfully demanded largesse for Northern Ireland, the UUP leader, Robin Swann, admitted, 'it would be churlish of me not to welcome the money' (interview, 14 August 2017).

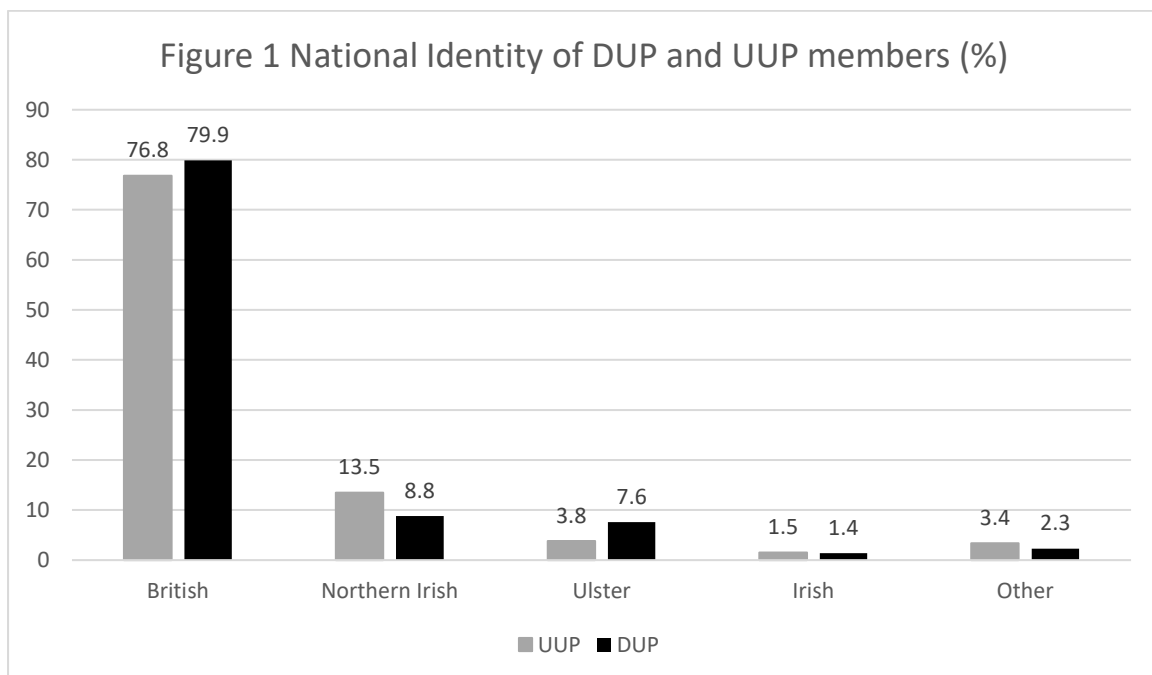
### **Continuing differences or growing similarities? Religion, Identity and Gender**

As the DUP has eclipsed the UUP, there has been talk of merger, amid apparent reduction of distinguishing intra-unionist characteristics. At the end of the 1990s, the parties were divided on the GFA; differed in support, with the DUP's backing more working-class (Evans and Duffy 1997) and possessed different Protestant denominational compositions given the DUP's Free

Presbyterianism (Hennessey et al. 2019). As the DUP advanced to become the dominant party, capturing middle-class unionist votes, class differentials in terms of support diminished (Evans and Tonge 2009). UUP members are subjectively more likely to see themselves as middle-class than DUP counterparts and objectively they are, but the differences are modest (Hennessey et al. 2019). What of other aspects of difference? Have religious and national identity distinctions diminished and are there gender divisions between two historically male-dominated parties?

### Identity distinctions: senses of Britishness

There is little difference in terms of the extent of British primary identity held by DUP and UUP members, as Figure 1 shows.



Source: Tonge et al. (2014); Hennessey et al. (2019).

As can be seen, there is a very widespread commitment to Britishness, the overwhelming primary identity of choice. There have always been some within unionism whose Britishness has had a regional focus (Todd 1987) and it is important to distinguish the often-subtle variations between UUP and DUP members in their understandings of their identity, the position of those who identify as Northern Irish, and ambivalent, or negative, relationship some hold towards their sense of Irishness. Across the UUP and DUP, understandings of what it is to be a unionist differ and these distinctions are also evident in how party members identify with regional Northern Irish identities and Irishness.

For most DUP and UUP members, the basic choice of identity is straightforward. As a DUP councillor put it, 'Britishness - ticks all the boxes, the Queen, the flag, the economy ... parliament, everything about it. ... We are brought up in the British way of life and not the Irish way of life' (interview with Alan Leslie, 20 September 2012). The vast bulk of both DUP and UUP members (almost 80 per cent in both parties) see their primary national identity and affiliation as 'British'. This attachment to Britishness is expressed through geography, national symbols, people, values and attitudes, cultural habits, citizenship, language and achievements. Unionists draw from across these identifiers to construct their major sense of identity. However, this does not mean that there is a uniform understanding across the party of what comprises Britishness.

Many unionist party members see their Britishness as natural. As DUP MP Gregory Campbell puts it, 'I instinctively describe myself as British' (interview, 18 October 2012). Another, Sammy Wilson, feels a similar innate sense: 'I have just always regarded myself as British and that is the way it is' (interview, 25 January 2013). These views were equally apparent amongst

UUP members, Belfast councillor Jim Rodgers claiming: 'I'm British. I'm not Northern Irish. I'm British. I'm proud to be British' (interview, 20 May 2016).

Although strong identification with Britishness across unionism remains evident, there is little agreement as to what Britishness means. For some DUP members, their sense of Britishness was best expressed through a strong sense of cultural attachment and a feeling of belonging to a wider British community. As DUP former MLA Nelson McCausland put it: 'Britishness ... is a sense of belonging to the United Kingdom ... to all of that history and culture ... that sort of liberal parliamentary democracy (interview, 9 January 2013) whereas for others, British identity is more predominantly about cultural linkages. DUP leader, Arlene Foster, sees Britishness as

'an attachment [at] many, many levels. It is historical ... and it's where I want to be politically ... socially it is good for me, economically it is good for me, culturally I feel an attachment to the rest of the UK as opposed to the Republic of Ireland. I don't feel comfortable with the culture of the Republic of Ireland but I feel very comfortable with the culture of the UK (interview, 24 January 2013).

### **Northern Irishness, Irishness and Unionism**

While Britishness is clearly the dominant superordinate identity there are variants. Expressions of Northern Irish identity are evident, but not particularly commonplace, within either party. Some 13.5 per cent of UUP members give 'Northern Irish' as their prime identity, while the equivalent figure for the DUP is 8.8 per cent. DUP members are twice as likely as UUP members to identify as 'Ulster' rather than have an identity with Irish in the label. Most DUP members are resistant to the idea of Northern Irishness as a central point of identity. As one DUP councillor expressed it, 'Northern Irish is not a term I use. I always say British. I might say I am an Ulsterman, but never Northern Irish' (interview with Robert Adair, 11 September 2012).



Indeed, some within the DUP see the rise in popularity of ‘Northern Irishness’ as a challenge to their sense of identity and, according to a former MLA, part of a deliberate strategy to undermine Protestant British identity, ‘for political advantage’ (interview with Sydney Anderson, 5 November 2012). Nelson McCausland argues that Northern Irish identity has been deliberately developed and pushed by government, adding, ‘I don’t see myself as Irish or Northern or any other type of Irishness. I live in Northern Ireland but I don’t see myself as Irish (interview, 9 January 2013).

Advocates of Northern Irishness are slightly more common in the UUP, with holders of such an identification with Northern Irishness believing it represents a more ‘neutral’ and inclusive form of identity. As an Omagh focus group member put it:

I can’t imagine your traditional nationalist ever being incredibly comfortable ... calling themselves British, and all the trappings that go along with that, you know, the Union flag, the monarchy, all the rest. But, I think, certainly in the short term, the Northern Irish identity is something we can all share in. We can all say, we’re Northern Irish. I can say, “Yes, I’m Northern Irish, but I want to maintain a link with the Union.” Somebody else can say, “Well, I’m Northern Irish, but I want to join a United Ireland.” But, if we can get to a position where we can all kind of agree, we’re Northern Irish, but we want to go in different directions, that’s a step forward from where we are at the minute (20 May 2016).

### **Limited Irishness**

Less than two per cent of either DUP or UUP members choose Irish as their primary identity. ‘Irishness’ is overtly rejected by many, particularly those adopting a more cultural interpretation of unionist identity. Even some cognisant of multi-dimensional aspects of their identity decline recognition of Irishness. As Arlene Foster elaborates:

There are so many layers to identity. You can’t just say that you are one thing and I think that’s true no matter where you come from. I could identify myself as a Fermanagh person, or I could identify myself by religion. What am I comfortable with? I am comfortable with being called British; I am comfortable being called Northern Irish. Not comfortable being called Irish because it associates with

everything green and Gaelic and everything from the Republic of Ireland (interview, 24 January 2013).

A different reading is sometimes apparent amongst sections of the UUP, as indicated by Reg

Empey:

Well, I've different identities I suppose. If anybody asked me what my identity is - I'm British. But I'm quite content to be an Irish unionist; no difficulty with that. Some people identify with the locality of Northern Ireland or Ulster, but I see Britishness as being something that applies to these islands.... I think there has been a tendency to try and distance oneself from the concept of Irishness but I think that that has been achieved for political reasons and I understand them. But as I say, Irishness is respected on the national flag; it's represented on the Royal Standard. Even when I was Lord Mayor it was represented in every other link on the Lord Mayor's chain (cited in Cochrane 1997: 94).

Unionist constructions of Irishness are different to the way unionists understand Irish nationalists and republicans. For unionists across both parties, any affinity is strictly cultural. There is no sense of affinity with Irishness as a national political descriptor. As Southern (2007) argues, the Irishness that unionists feel comfortable with is the depoliticized form represented by examples such as 'the regiments of the Irish Guards and the Royal Irish Regiment ... the all-Ireland basis for playing rugby, and the religious institutions whose titles include the words *Irish* or *Ireland* such as the Irish Baptist College, the Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

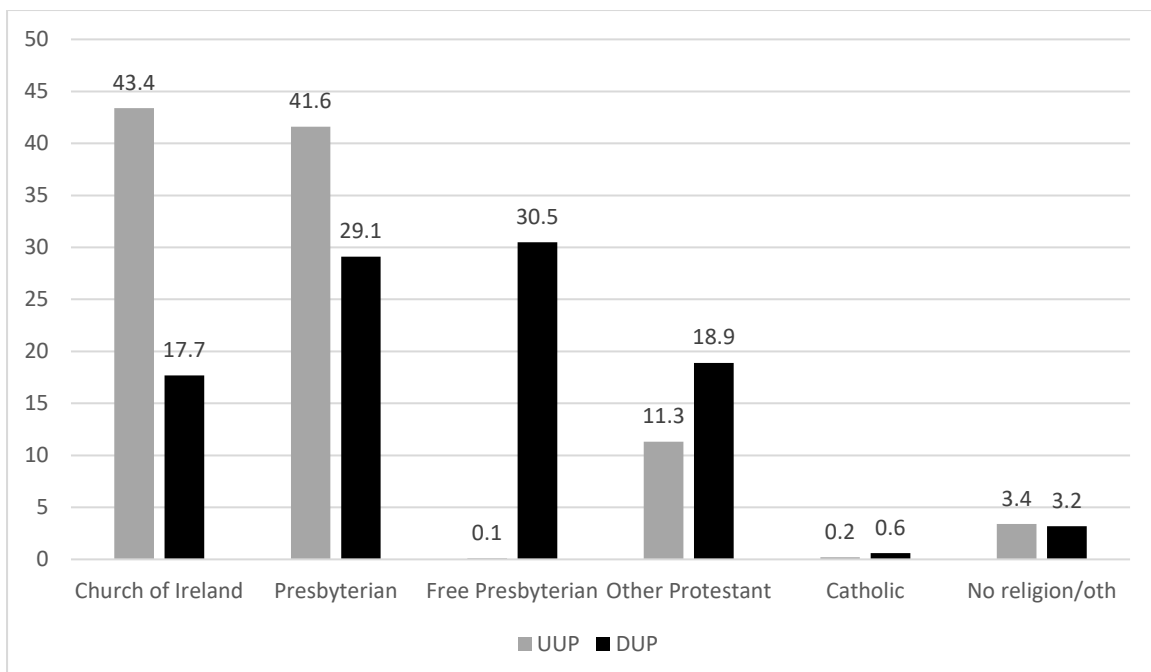
Civic and ethnic forms of Britishness are common to both the UUP and the DUP. The UUP was more associated historically with civic Britishness, offering greater allegiance to Westminster and then, in the era of post-GFA devolved Assembly power-sharing, support for what David Trimble (1998: 2) called a 'pluralist parliament for a pluralist people'. Yet as the DUP also came to support power-sharing, the UUP-DUP civic distinction diminished somewhat. In the promotion of ethnic Britishness, there is little to distinguish the two parties

these days. Members of both parties reject Irishness as an identity whilst rejecting claims they are anti-Irish. Ethnic unionism based upon a Protestant-British way of life remains evident in both parties, particularly among Orange Order members, but the British national aspect is more overt than the religious dimension these days.

### **Protestantism, Orangeism and social conservatism**

If national identity differences are small and civic versus ethnic unionist distinctions reduced, what of the religious composition of the two main unionist parties? Whilst the UUP was always influenced by Protestantism, its unionism came first. For the DUP, Protestantism was the basis for its unionism. This reflected sizeable Protestant denominational differences between the two main unionist parties, which remain evident as Figure 2 shows.

Figure 2 Religious affiliation of DUP and UUP members (%)



Source: Tonge et al. (2014); Hennessey et al. (2019).

Despite amounting to only one per cent of the Protestant population, Free Presbyterians are (just) the largest category within the DUP. Of that Free Presbyterian contingent, less than half were brought up as such, many being ‘born again’ converts. However, whilst a majority of the DUP pre-GFA was Free Presbyterian, the number of such joiners has been low in the last two decades, falling even before Ian Paisley stood down from the leadership of that Church and the DUP in 2008. The DUP’s Westminster leader, Nigel Dodds, claims a modest contemporary religious outlook for his Party, placing it ‘in the great tradition of the European parties where Christian Democracy is a mainstream political view’ (interview, 3 July 2013). The DUP also saw a large influx (one-in-five of its total membership) of non-Free Presbyterian defectors from the UUP in the decade following the GFA. The legacy of Paisley’s leadership, in which the DUP operated as a political vehicle often espousing the worldview of that church, remains evident nonetheless, when contrasted with the composition of the UUP, whose members eschewed the fundamentalist Free Presbyterian variety of Protestantism in favour of mainstream denominations. The UUP’s Church of Ireland and Presbyterian percentages are in line with those found among Northern Ireland’s Protestant population.

The virtual absence of Catholics in both unionist parties is stark. Compositionally at least, both unionist vehicles are Protestant parties, with Catholic membership below one per cent in each. The imbalance is replicated in electoral politics. At the 2017 General Election, the percentage of Catholics voting DUP or UUP was below one per cent (Tonge et al. 2017). Successive Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys have highlighted the paradox of sizeable acquiescence among Catholics for Northern Ireland’s place in the UK being juxtaposed with rejection of parties backing that Union. According to the 2016 survey, zero per cent of Catholics described themselves as unionists. Yet the same survey indicated that 41 per cent of Catholics believed

that the best long-term solution for Northern Ireland was devolved government within the UK, a greater figure than the 35 per cent backing a united Ireland (Northern Ireland Life and Times survey 2016). Alternatively, the extent of Catholic unionism can be questioned. The 2017 Northern Ireland General Election study offered a force choice border poll between remaining part of the UK or becoming part of a united Ireland and only 14 per cent of Catholics preferred the UK option, 56 per cent favouring unity (Tonge et al. 2017).

Religious observance remains important to members across both parties, even if their support bases always extended beyond a religious core to embrace much more nominally religious unionists. A large majority of DUP and UUP members attend church at least monthly. On a zero (no influence) to 10 (very large amount of influence) scale, DUP members see their party as more influenced by faith and church than UUP members regard theirs. More than half rank the DUP's religious influence at 8 or higher, compared to only one-quarter of UUP members viewing their own party in a similar way. More DUP members also *want* their party to be religious. Using the same 0-10 influence scale for question of how much influence faith and church should have upon their party, 27 per cent of DUP members wanted the maximum possible, almost double the percentage of UUP members. DUP MP Paul Girvan argues: 'Some people say religion and politics should never really mix. I am a total disbeliever in that aspect because I believe politics came about through religion. If you use the Ten Commandments you can formulate almost every law that you need (interview, 7 January 2013). The DUP's religious ferocity is now far less overt, but it remains guided by points of Protestant Christian principle.

Only 20 per cent of DUP members and 28 per cent of their UUP counterparts want a low (0-4) level of faith and church influence. Free Presbyterians are most desirous of religious influence within the DUP. Younger members of the UUP are less keen on religious influence but age does not attain significance within the DUP. Whilst a common UUP argument historically to distinguish it from the DUP was that its unionism is bound up far more in liberal 'British' values, a rational contractual Union owing nothing to a particular religion, both sets of party members support religious influences.

Transformation of the unionist parties into civic organisations, whose case for the Union has no religious association, continues apace but is incomplete. Critics may highlight sectarian outlooks. Only a minority of DUP and UUP members 'would not mind' if a close relative married outside their religion. Most DUP members would prefer their offspring to be educated alongside children of similar faith, whereas the majority of UUP members would prefer to see a single integrated system of education, with only one-third supporting faith schools.

Orangeism continues to be associated with unionism, but not formally nor via association with one party. The link between the political and Protestant arms of unionism was formalised via the role for the Orange Order within the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) from 1905 until 2005 (Walker 2004). From the 1920s until the 1970s, 95 per cent of UUP MPs at Westminster belonged to the Order. Although the Orange Order helped unite the UUP, it also infused unionism with a sectarian flavour. However, the Orange-UUP alliance fractured over the GFA, a deal which, the Order's Grand Lodge opined, 'no Protestant in good conscience could support' (*Orange Standard*, May 1998: 1). Prisoner releases, policing changes and unrepentant 'terrorists' in government were viewed as immoral. David Trimble was challenged for the party

leadership in 2000 by the former Grand Master of the Orange Order, the Reverend Martin Smyth, who polled a hefty 43 per cent of the UUC vote, mainly from Orange Order members, for his insurgency.

The severing of the Orange-UUP link was also part of a process of unionist modernisation. Conscious of the Order's position as a barrier to where he wanted to take his Party in terms of both outlook and structure, Trimble embarked 'on a programme of events to quietly drive the Orange out ... We were doing that with a view of creating a situation where they would disappear, which they did, but it took years' (interview, 30 June 2016). Compromises with Catholic nationalists were more difficult when opposed by an organisation holding a jaundiced view of the minority population. A majority of Orange Order members believed that 'most Catholics are IRA sympathisers'; only 29 per cent of Orange Order members supported the GFA and, by 2007, 65 per cent expressed allegiance to the DUP, not the UUP, with Paisley twice as popular as Trimble. (McAuley et al. 2011). A power-sharing deal offering the political representatives of the IRA a stake in government was an impossible sell to sceptical brethren. Trimble was determined to help break down old religious prejudices fuelled by arcane Orange rules, paying tribute to Catholic Unionists in his address to party conference and attending Catholic funerals.

The Orange Order saved Trimble the bother of removal, leaving the UUC voluntarily in 2005, by which time most of the Order's members were no longer voting for the Party to which Grand Lodge was affiliated. Making the UUP more attractive to Catholics was not prominent on the radar however; what mattered was the lack of mutual benefit to the Orange-UUP link. Trimble regarded Orange delegates as troublesome and the alliance anachronistic. The Orange Order

saw little value backing a unionist party which had taken a course opposed by many Orangemen, who were switching political allegiance. Whilst the UUP retained sizeable support among older and more middle-class Orange Order members, support had ebbed in all other demographic categories (McAuley et al. 2011). The severance of the formal link between unionism and Orangeism is rarely lamented. Robin Swann concedes it ‘became harmful – it was holding both back (interview, 14 August 2017). Individual membership of the Order remains commonplace among unionist parties, at 35 per cent in each. However, it increases among elected representatives of the DUP, to more than half of councillors and 60 per cent of MLAs and MPs, whereas within the UUP, elected representatives are less likely to belong to the Orange Order than other members. Orangeism is declining within the UUP. Only 23 per cent of UUP members aged under 35 belong to the Order, whereas the majority (52 per cent) of those aged 65 and over belong (Hennessey et al. 2019).

Across the unionist parties, there is warmth towards the Order: two-thirds of UUP members ‘strongly like’ or ‘like’ the organisation; only 10 per cent record a disliking, although younger UUP members are less enamoured. Sympathy for Orange causes is sizeable. Most (58 per cent) DUP members believe in unfettered Orange Order marching rights; a slight majority (52 per cent) of UUP members view meaningful local engagement and/or local agreements as prerequisites for parades (Hennessey et al. 2019). Both unionist parties remain critical of the Parades Commission as a regulatory body. Robin Swann claims to have felt ‘hostility from the Commission ... I wouldn’t have even met from those opposing the parades’ (interview 14 August 2017).

Unionism’s religious influences contribute to the social conservatism which eventually became an intercommunal issue in terms of same-sex marriage and abortion as Sinn Fein backed



change. For the DUP, social conservatism, what members would see as moral stances, are part of the religious shaping of the party. The UUP stresses these are conscience issues, with no party line. All DUP MLAs and the vast majority of UUP MLAs opposed same-sex marriage in the five Assembly votes on the issue between 2012 and 2015. Only two of the UUP's 13 MLAs voted in favour of liberalisation. The then party leader, Mike Nesbitt, wondered whether his party was 'on the wrong side of history?' in opposing same-sex marriage, a query he acknowledged attracted little obvious sympathy at his party conference (interview, 16 December 2016). The DUP was unconcerned by the conscience argument. Peter Robinson, leader from 2008 to 2015, asserted: 'It wouldn't matter in the DUP if it was a free vote. People would be freely voting the way they always have. I think the very fact everybody knows what everyone else's views in the party would be on these kinds of issues makes it comfortable for us to organise ourselves within the party for them' (interview, 25 June 2013).

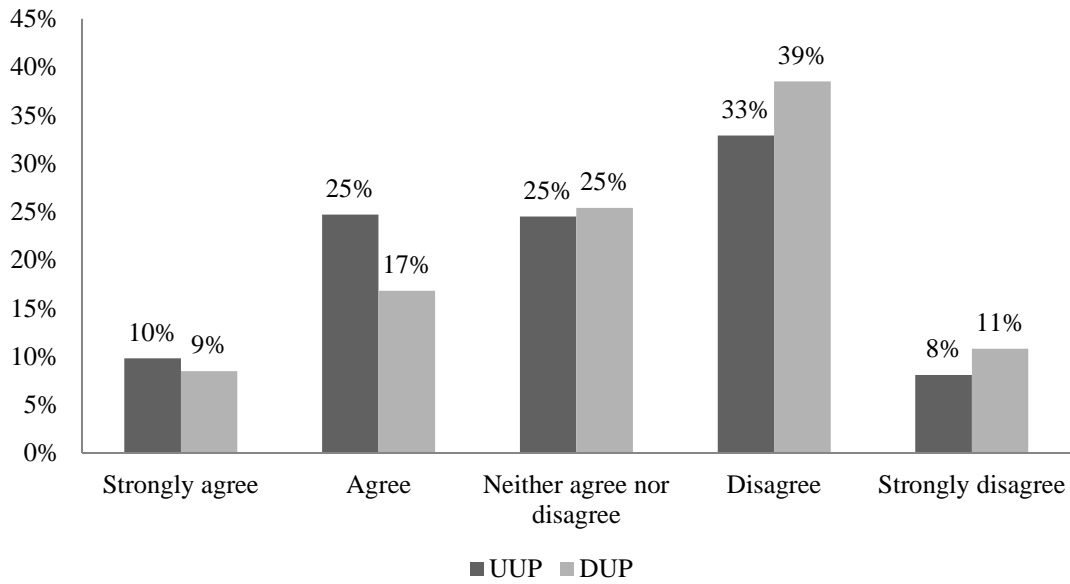
Unionist party members are more conservative than their voters. Slightly more DUP voters at the 2017 general election supported legalising same-sex marriage than opposed; UUP voters were evenly divided. The extent of social conservatism was greater than the overall population: 54 per cent of voters backed same-sex marriage, with 23 per cent opposed (Tonge et al. 2017). Whilst two-thirds of DUP members thought 'homosexuality is wrong' (Tonge et al. 2014) and 57 per cent of UUP members opposed the legalisation of same-sex marriage (Hennessey et al. 2019) these views were not shared by many unionist voters, nor by most unionists beyond the DUP and UUP support bases. Most unionist voters are also more liberal on abortion, more favouring legalisation than are opposed, but the reverse is true of DUP members. UUP members favour a more liberal approach, but most UUP MLAs dissent, only three supporting legal terminations in cases of foetal abnormality in the Assembly vote taken in 2016.

### **Female political representation**

Unionist politics has been deficient in terms of female representation. Nationalist parties have progressed in terms of female candidacy selection and election, but unionist parties have lagged, notwithstanding that the DUP has a woman leader (and its only MEP is a woman). Substantive barriers to women's representation remain, determined by party culture, attitudes and assumed gender roles within unionism, with both parties failing to meaningfully tackle longstanding inequity. This situation exists despite Northern Ireland's electoral system assisting the potential to ensure gender parity (see Fawcett Society 2012). Gender quotas are rejected by the members and leaderships of both the DUP and UUP.

More members of both parties dispute the presence of discrimination against women in public life than accept its existence (Figure 3). A majority of women in the UUP (56 per cent) support the proposition that there is discrimination but only 43 per cent of DUP women members concur. Only 25 per cent of male respondents in the UUP believe there is discrimination against women and a mere 19 per cent of DUP male members think likewise.

**Figure 3: Attitudes to the proposition 'There is discrimination against women in public life ' among DUP and UUP members**



Yet, if the proposition that there is discrimination against women in public life is rejected, how is the underrepresentation of elected unionist women politicians explained? Female candidacy has never reached 30 per cent of those fielded by either party. The UUP has shown minimal initiative to address women's underrepresentation, only slightly bettered by the DUP who have opted for central selection of women candidates. The central selection process, whereby candidates are selected at a central executive meeting as opposed to a branch meeting, has at least represented a by-passing of traditional male-dominated local politics. Paula Bradley, one DUP female Assembly member who was put forward via central selection, highlighted the value of such procedures in overcoming traditional barriers.

I didn't have to go through the selection process. Our party found five seats in which they thought it possible for us to take an extra seat at the election. I think they chose four women for those five seats. That's how they got the women in, because the women weren't standing up at the front of the room and going through the selection process (interview, 20 September 2012).

Recent elections to Northern Ireland's political institutions provide reminders of the distance to travel within the main unionist parties towards gender equity. At the 2019 local elections, women accounted for 22 per cent of the DUP's candidates and a mere 15 per cent of the UUP's, which translated into 19 per cent female political representation for each party. The DUP and UUP were significantly out of step with the nationalist parties, as Sinn Fein and the SDLP fielded 38 per cent and 35 per cent women candidates respectively. In the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly election, female candidacy was similarly low within the DUP, at 21 per cent and little better for the UUP, at 25 per cent. Although still well below gender parity, these figures at least represented a rapid and sizeable advance on the 2016 Assembly contest, when the figures were 13 per cent (DUP) and 8 per cent (UUP). There are six women DUP MLAs, 21 per cent of the total, but only one UUP MLA, of ten, is a woman.

With DUP women candidates seeing an equal rate of election as men in 2017, at an impressive 75 per cent (bettered only by Sinn Féin) the issue appears to be one of candidacy supply, not opposition from voters. As a DUP woman MLA put it:

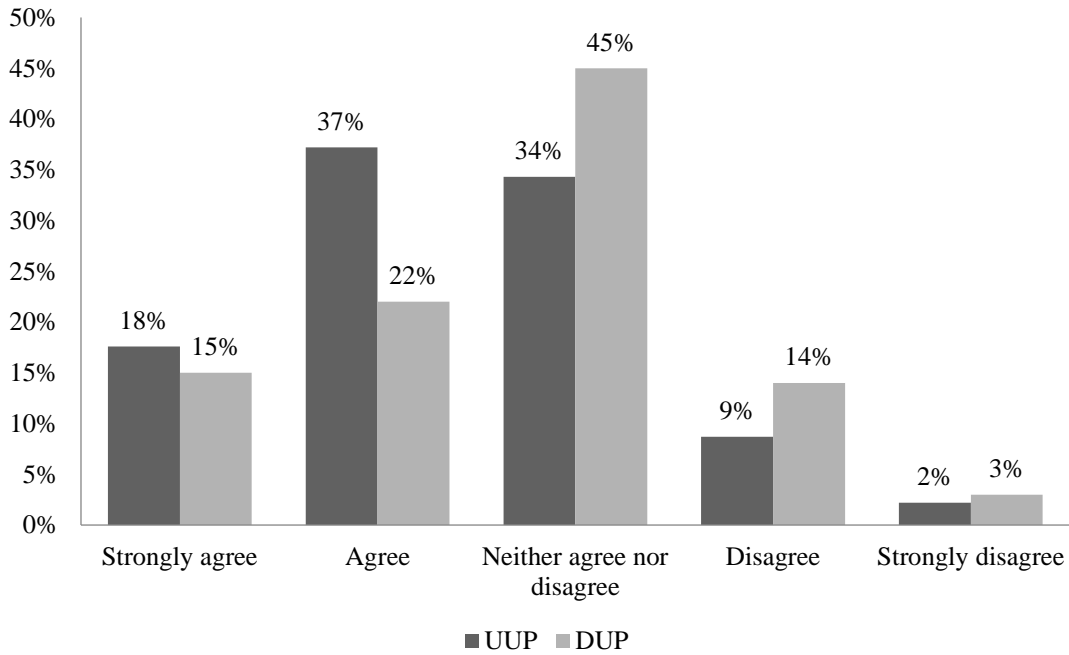
I think that it is very hard to get women involved in politics in the unionist family. I think that nationalists are much better at attracting women from a community point of view. We are not so good at that. I know that the party wants to encourage more women to become involved itself is not the most attractive job for a woman. It is a very difficult job for a woman. The environment is very difficult (interview, 16 September 2013).

Female party members and elected representatives credit the UUP and DUP leadership with giving them encouragement and do not consider their party to possess structural barriers inhibiting gender equality. One female UUP member asserted: 'I have never had any problems with the men but I know a lot of women felt very nervous about putting their names forward.' (Female UUP focus group member, 22 October 2016).

The low level of female political representation is explained internally by the parties in terms of supply side factors, including lack of resources, family responsibilities or low confidence, not internal resistance. A DUP woman councillor claimed to ‘have never had any barriers within the DUP. In the last election I was asked to stand...men were pushing me to go into that role’ (interview, 28 February 2013). One female DUP MLA argued women should ‘grow balls and stand up for themselves’ (interview, 4 December 2012). Whilst the blame for the low levels of female representation is largely pointed towards women for not putting themselves forward, there was recognition by former DUP leader Peter Robinson of the social conservatism within unionism: ‘I think the old Ulster farmer’s wife and all the rest of it whose job is at home and let the men do that kind of work, that is far too prevalent in the thinking, especially within Christian circles’. (interview, 25 June 2013).

Do party members think politics in Northern Ireland would improve if more women were elected? Results demonstrate how the majority of UUP members (55 per cent) believe this likely but only 37 per cent of the DUP members think likewise [Figure 4]. There are sizeable gender differences, in that majorities of women members in both parties, 70 per cent in the UUP and 51 per cent in the DUP, believe that politics would improve with more women elected, but only a minority of men in both parties concur.

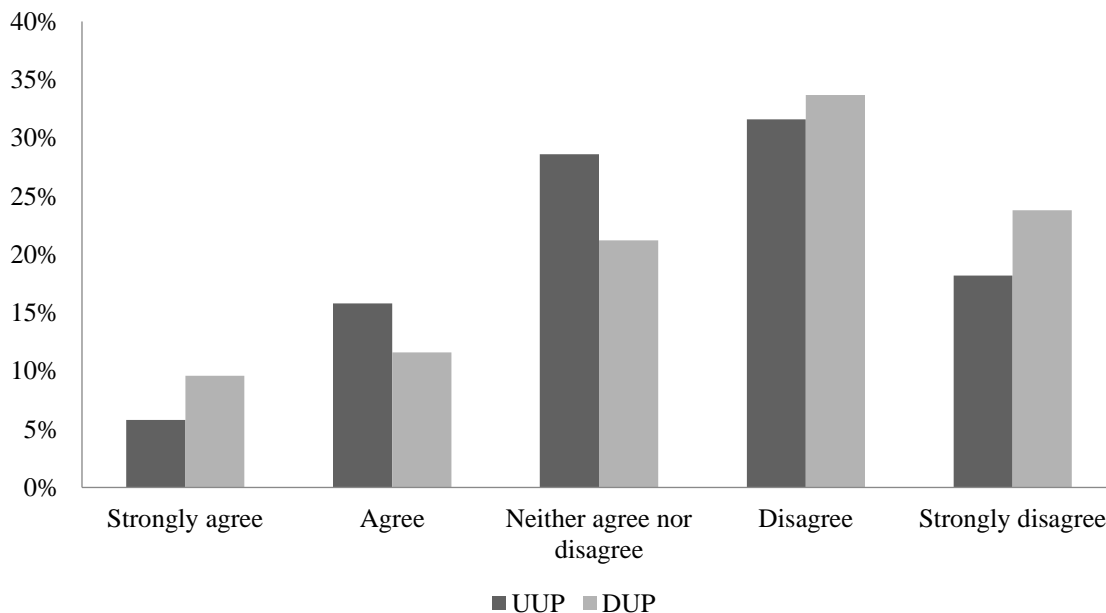
**Figure 4: Attitudes to the proposition 'Politics in Northern Ireland would improve if more women were elected' among DUP and UUP members**



Despite being less likely to recognise gender discrimination and being less supportive of women having a positive impact on politics, the DUP has managed to steadily improve descriptive representation of female representatives. In December 2015, the party appointed Arlene Foster as the first female leader of the party. Her coronation demonstrated a deliberate moderation away from the party's male dominated image. The increase in women DUP elected representatives does not necessarily, however, demonstrate a shift on the views on gender equality from the grass roots, but instead reflects the leadership's willingness, and ability, to make centralised decisions. The DUP's top-down structures allow the party leadership to determine candidate selection, which has boosted the number of women standing for election. Even after some centralisation within the UUP, local constituency associations remain important as male-dominated fiefdoms (Matthews, 2014).

Beyond the central selection used by the DUP both parties have largely relied on notions of meritocracy to provide elected representatives. Most DUP and UUP members disagree with having a fixed proportion of women candidates [Figure 5]. Women within each party are more supportive than their male counterparts, with women in the UUP being more supportive than those in the DUP, but even among UUP women support only reaches 35 per cent. DUP males are the most conservative in their views, with four times as many men opposed to a fixed proportion of women candidates as favour the idea.

**Figure 5: Attitudes to the proposition 'The party should have a fixed proportion of women candidates' among DUP and UUP members**



Structural features of the DUP, notably its leadership dominance, have therefore facilitated representational improvements, rather than major attitudinal shifts. Despite UUP members appearing more progressive on issues of gender equality in politics, the party has struggled to translate this into policies addressing the scarcity of women in leadership and elected positions.

## **Conclusion**

The modern dominance of the DUP within unionism has been accompanied by a diminution of the differences between the two main unionist parties. As the twentieth century concluded, there was a deep faultline between the bombastic, anti-GFA, Free Presbyterian, party of protest DUP, and a conservatively cautious, pro-GFA UUP which had long represented the bulk of the Protestant middle-class. As the DUP came to eclipse its rival and then accepted the GFA, some distinguishing features of the two parties became less marked. One-in-five of the DUP's members used to belong to the UUP, defecting after the furore over the GFA, helping dilute distinctions. The DUP has become cross-class in terms of backing and the denominational pre-eminence of the Free Presbyterian Church among its membership, whilst still striking, is rapidly being reduced. Orange Order affiliations are held at similar levels across both parties. The UUP's involvement in the Westminster system has been displaced by the DUP's near-monopoly of unionist seats and, for a time, an important parliamentary position.

Some similarities are longer standing. The inability to attract Catholic members remains acute and identical across both parties. There have been improvements in women's representation, particularly in the DUP, but these have been modest. In terms of the national identification of members, there is very little difference, even if the DUP's rejection of Irishness can be somewhat more overt. Both sets of members overwhelmingly identify as British. If the main differences are historical rather than contemporary, the obvious question begged is the purpose of maintaining two unionist parties, particularly if intra-unionist rivalry assists nationalism. Yet the narcissism of small modern differences cannot erase the proudly held histories of fiercely loyal party memberships who would fight fusion. Their unionism might be similar but the



organisations representing the ideology will always be different in the view of those most committed to either unionist party.

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Jim Wells, DUP MLA, 9 January 2013.

Sammy Wilson, DUP MP, 25 January 2013.

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