

## **Textes et contextes**

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université Bourgogne Europe

18-2 | 2023

The “crisis of political parties” in the British & Irish Isles

# The “crisis of political parties” in the British and Irish Isles

*La « crise des partis politiques » dans les îles Britanniques et Irlandaises*

**Marie-Violaine Louvet Nathalie Duclos**

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=4464>

Le texte seul, hors citations, est utilisable sous [Licence CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont susceptibles d’être soumis à des autorisations d’usage spécifiques.

Marie-Violaine Louvet Nathalie Duclos, « The “crisis of political parties” in the British and Irish Isles », *Textes et contextes* [], 18-2 | 2023, . Copyright : Le texte seul, hors citations, est utilisable sous [Licence CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont susceptibles d’être soumis à des autorisations d’usage spécifiques.. URL : <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=4464>

PREO

# The “crisis of political parties” in the British and Irish Isles

*La « crise des partis politiques » dans les îles Britanniques et Irlandaises*

## **Textes et contextes**

18-2 | 2023

The “crisis of political parties” in the British & Irish Isles

Marie-Violaine Louvet Nathalie Duclos

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=4464>

Le texte seul, hors citations, est utilisable sous [Licence CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont susceptibles d’être soumis à des autorisations d’usage spécifiques.

- 
- 1 Many works on liberal democracies & their political systems have postulated the existence of a crisis of political parties or of political representation and representative democracy (Daalder 1992, Hayward 1995, Ryden 1996, Ignazi 1996, Webb 2005, De Leon 2021). This diagnosis is often based on a combination of different phenomena, prominent among which are the electoral decline of once dominant traditional parties and the collapse in their party memberships, alongside popular disillusionment with party politics, electoral volatility and high levels of abstention. Yet, as Katz and Crotty point out, political parties are “indispensable to a democracy”. They ensure that democratic institutions run smoothly, their functions including:

representing the interests of the mass of voters; mobilizing them to support candidates and parties; presenting issue alternatives relevant to the problem facing the nation and enacting them once in office; recruiting candidates to run for public office and supporting them in campaigns; and providing the unity and cohesion to make a fragmented governing system perform adequately. (Katz & Crotty 2006: 25)

- 2 A “crisis of political parties” would indicate a failure to fulfil these representational functions. It would also be a symptom of a more

widespread illness affecting modern democracies, where citizens call into question political elites who have failed to perform the functions that justify their very existence, causing massive “political disillusionment” (Richards, Smith & Hay 2014: 101-124).

- 3 Even a cursory look at the political situation in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland seems to confirm the existence of a crisis of political parties. One particularly notable phenomenon that can be observed across the modern-day British and Irish Isles is the waning success of the major political forces that had traditionally held power. In the Republic of Ireland, this is the case of both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, two parties with an ideology close to the centre-right. The distinction between the two is based on the legacy of the Civil War in the 1920s after which the faction that supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty became Fine Gael, while the one that opposed the Treaty founded Fianna Fáil. The specificity of the Irish colonial history has created a very distinct political scene, which is not organised along the left-right divide and which has traditionally been characterized by a very strong centre and a weak left, as illustrated by the poor results of the Irish Labour Party (Gallagher 1985: 1; Hayward & Murphy 2010: 2). At the latest general election in 2020, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, who had previously held power in succession since the 1920s, failed to win a majority of the popular votes and had to painstakingly join forces to form a coalition government (Gallagher & Marsh 2004). In Northern Ireland, the traditional ruling parties have also seen a decline in their popularity. Like that of the Republic of Ireland, the political landscape of Northern Ireland is not organised along the left-right divide, but rather shaped by a constitutional divide between the unionist parties, which advocate keeping Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, and the nationalist parties, which would like to see a United Ireland, *i.e.* the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Republic of Ireland. While unionism has historically dominated debates in Stormont, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the latest elections in 2022 saw this dominance challenged as the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was forced to relinquish its lead for the first time. In Scotland, where the Labour Party was the dominant party for 50 years, having come first at every UK general election from the late 1950s as well as at the first two Scottish Parliament elections, in 1999 and 2003, it has now lost its status as a dominant party (in Sartori’s

definition of the word; see Sartori 1976) in favour of the SNP, which itself has been the Scottish government party since 2007 and won every election organised on Scottish soil since the failed independence referendum of 2014.

- 4 At the wider UK level, by contrast, the two traditional ruling parties, namely the Conservative and Labour parties, which have alternated in power since the inter-war years, have remained the only parties of government. However, they no longer attract the vote shares which they did in the post-war years and up until the 1970s, which saw the beginning of a process of voter de-alignment, and it is the electoral system used for UK general elections (the single member plurality system commonly known as the “First Past the Post” system) that has allowed them to keep winning overall majorities in the House of Commons. Of the four latest parliamentary elections organised on British soil (the European elections of May 2019, the UK general election of December 2019, and the 2021 Scottish and Welsh elections), the traditional British ruling parties only managed to win two: the UK general election and the Welsh one. In other words, apart in Wales, in elections where a proportional or mixed electoral system is used, voters have voted into power a party other than Labour or the Conservatives. The distortions induced by the First Past the Post system have therefore served to hide the extent to which the traditional mainstream parties have lost their electoral dominance within the UK, with Wales being a notable exception.
- 5 The electoral decline of the British established parties since the 1970s has gone together with a decline in their party membership. As noted by Moran, in Britain:

The two former giants have vanished as mass parties: a Conservative membership that peaked at around 2.8 million in 1953 is now about 150,000, most of them elderly; Labour, despite the ‘bounce’ associated with Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership campaign, has a membership now less than half the 1950s’ peak. (Moran 2017: 73-74)

- 6 The decline of mainstream parties that can be observed across the British and Irish Isles seems to validate the theory of a crisis of political parties and to set the UK and the Republic of Ireland in the family of Western European democracies which have experienced a similar

decline. However, there are several things which make the British and Irish archipelago a distinctive case study and which put into perspective the alleged crisis of the mainstream parties. First and foremost, despite their undeniable decline in popularity, the traditional ruling parties of the UK and of the Republic of Ireland have managed to remain in power in both States, although they have found it increasingly difficult to win overall majorities and have often been forced to form either coalition or minority governments. It could therefore be argued (as does Moran in the case of the UK) that “what has decayed in recent decades is not just a couple of parties”, but the traditional party system (Moran 2017: 74), which in both the UK and the Republic of Ireland was the two-party system based not only on an alternance in power of two parties, but also on strong majority governments (Sartori 1976). The articles included in this special issue shed light on the different party systems that have developed across the territories of the British and Irish Isles and that have challenged the traditional two-party systems of both States concerned. Moran contends that, although “[t]he crisis of the party system is, as the comparative evidence makes clear, part of a wider crisis faced by elites across advanced democracies, [...] the crisis of the *British* party system is special to these islands” (Moran 2017: 77). The articles presented here show the extent to which this hypothesis proves true and can be applied to the whole British and Irish Isles.

- 7 Secondly, one of the traditional ruling parties of the UK, namely the Labour Party, has not been uniformly in crisis across the British and Irish Isles. By comparing the diverse fortunes of the Labour Party across the whole archipelago, the journal issue challenges the idea of a generalised crisis of traditional ruling parties, with the party having maintained its status as a dominant party in Wales, though not in Scotland. It is however undeniable that “electoral support for Conservative and Labour has not only fallen greatly; it has also narrowed territorially” (Moran 2017: 74), with the Conservatives now largely relying on votes in South of England constituencies and Labour having lost much of its support in its historical heartlands of Scotland and Northern England.
- 8 Additionally, if there is a “crisis of political parties”, it only concerns some parties (the mainstream ones), and not all of them. At the same time that historically dominant parties have experienced a decline in

their popularity, other parties have better adjusted to the change in the political opportunity structure and have improved their electoral results quite significantly, to the point that some of them have even become government parties (Tarrow 1989). Ignazi contends that mainstream parties are in crisis because they are under attack from “left libertarian parties” and “extreme right parties” (Ignazi 1996). This assessment is only partly true in the case of the British and Irish Isles. In the UK, the far-right Eurosceptic parties (UKIP and then the Brexit Party, now renamed Reform UK) seemed for a time to pose a challenge to the mainstream parties. However, the First Past the Post system has impeded their ability to win seats in the UK House of Commons (where UKIP only ever won one seat, and the Brexit Party none). Although the Brexit Party managed to come first in the 2019 European election, none of these extreme-right parties have gained access to power at any electoral level in the UK, and the Eurosceptic far right’s main success was in obtaining the organisation of a referendum on the UK’s EU membership, which itself led to Brexit. In Northern Ireland specifically, the fact that the dominant unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party, is very conservative socially leaves virtually no political space for the development of extreme-right parties. In the Republic of Ireland, the extreme right has been very weak historically, and it remains so, even though it is currently becoming more vocal on issues such as immigration and better organized (O’Malley 2008; Garner 2007; Louvet 2021). Has the challenge to traditional parties come from left-libertarian parties, which Kitschelt defines as defending a fair redistribution of resources, the emancipation of the individual and the promotion of his/her rights through democratic participation (Kitschelt 1988)? If Sinn Féin, primarily a left-wing democratic socialist party, was included in the category of left-libertarian parties, one could partly answer in the affirmative. In addition to a strong support for the reunification of Ireland into a single political entity, the republican party, organised on both sides of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, has focused its recent campaigns on bread-and-butter issues, in particular the right to housing, better access to the health system and increased purchasing power, all particularly attractive for young voters. This strategy has been successful and in the latest elections in the Republic of Ireland (in 2020) and Northern Ireland (in 2022), Sinn Féin received the highest number of popular votes. Con-

sequently, Sinn Féin won 27 out of 90 seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly, thus becoming the majority political party with a right to nominate Northern Ireland’s first nationalist First Minister, an unprecedented prospect that has not become a reality due to unionist resistance. In the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin won 24.5% of the votes, with a majority of popular votes, and forced Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to get into a coalition together after ruling out the option of governing with the republican party. This strategy is reminiscent of that used by what Katz and Mair named “cartel parties” with a collusion and collaboration between former competitors to ensure their collective survival (Katz & Mair 1995).

- 9 In Scotland, the challenge to traditional parties has come from the SNP, which can more readily be described as a social democratic party – a political identity it has clearly tried to promote since the 1980s (Duclos 2020: 86-88) – than as a “left-libertarian” one, bearing in mind that in addition to a left-wing “commitment to egalitarian redistribution”, such parties “reject the authority of private or public bureaucracies to regulate individual and collective conduct” (Kitschelt 1990: 180), something which was traditionally characteristic of the SNP ideology but which has become less obvious in the case of the modern-day party. In any case, it is its identity as a nationalist party, rather than as a left-wing one, which has turned the SNP into the dominant party of Scotland. As a result of the polarisation of Scottish politics into pro- and anti-independence camps induced by the 2014 independence referendum, “[o]ne of the key developments in Scottish electoral politics over the last decade has been a strengthening of relationship between constitutional preference and party choice”, with independence supporters now overwhelmingly supporting the SNP, although the alignment between the two has weakened slightly in 2023 (Curtice 2023).
- 10 More generally, the fragmentation of the UK party system, which is at the heart of the crisis of the British mainstream parties, is itself a result of the “centripetal forces unleashed by the devolution reforms” (Moran 2017: 75). As noted by Johns and Mitchell in the case of the SNP:

Devolution was the key structural change and was probably a necessary condition for the SNP’s soaring vote shares. It created an arena

in which the SNP was strategically or “mathematically” viable, and in which Labour was pitted against an opponent much harder to beat than were the Conservatives on the crucial “Scottish interests” dimension. (Johns & Mitchell 2016: 252-253)

- 11 The differences between the Labour Party’s electoral results in the various territories of the British and Irish Isles are characteristic of the different dynamics that animate their political arenas. The first three articles in this issue point to the fact that a highly centralised, “one size fits all” model of a party trying to extend its influence without taking into account the particularities of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland is doomed to failure.
- 12 The first article by Fiona Simpkins, entitled “Labour in a ‘cold climate’: devolution, unionism and the Scottish Labour party”, sheds light on the current reasons for the electoral demise of the Labour Party in Scotland, where it was the leading party from the 1960s to 2007. She identifies two categories of causes: those linked to the “broader difficulties experienced by Labour on the wider British political scene”, and those linked to the “singularities of Scotland’s political landscape”. The article argues that the overarching reason behind Scottish Labour’s loss of its once dominant status is its failure to adapt to the challenges posed by devolution; in other words, Scottish Labour’s remarkable decline is fundamentally linked to its failure to adapt to multilevel governance. The Labour Party has remained very centralised in terms of its organisational structure. In particular, Scottish Labour has remained “overwhelmingly dependent on funds allocated by the central party organization”, and Simpkins draws a clear link between its “reliance on financial support from the UK party” and its “difficulty to become more autonomous in terms of policy and personnel”. Moreover, Simpkins reminds us that parties are electorally successful in Scotland when they are seen to represent and defend Scotland’s interests, something which Scottish Labour has been less successful at achieving in recent years than the SNP. Simpkins argues that Scottish Labour has failed to “carve out a clear Scottish identity for itself”, especially on the two major constitutional issues of independence and Brexit, as a result of which it has been unable to insulate itself from British Labour’s unpopularity on both issues. Scottish Labour’s electoral demise is therefore due to both internal and external reasons: on the one hand, it has remained a “unitary party in a

devolved environment”, and on the other hand, it has suffered from the reshaping of the political landscape in the wake of the 2014 independence referendum and the 2016 EU referendum: what place for Scottish Labour when on the one hand, Brexit and unionism are “most closely linked to the Conservatives”, while on the other hand, “independence and the EU are associated with the SNP”?

13 The article by Stéphanie Bory entitled “The Labour Party in Wales: ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’” shows that in Wales, the Labour Party has adopted tactics that have given it an unrivalled longevity in power. Contrary to Simpkins, for whom the party’s failure to give its Scottish branch organisational autonomy in the wake of devolution is a sign that it has not adapted to the post-devolution political environment, Bory contends that Labour continuing to remain a “top-down organisation” rather than a federal one, with Welsh Labour being but a local branch of the UK-wide party, shows that “[t]o a certain extent [...] the British Labour Party decided to apply devolution to its own structure and organisation”. By this, she means that devolution is at its core a top-down form of political system which is distinct from federalism in that the central UK institutions have remained sovereign. The aim of Bory’s article is to study how the Welsh Labour Party, which has been the dominant party in Wales not only since the introduction of devolution, but (astonishingly) since 1922, “has managed to free itself from the UK-wide Labour Party, a party in crisis in recent years – an opposition party torn by factional struggles since 2010 – just as Wales has obtained an enlarged devolution settlement”. Bory argues that one of the reasons it has managed to do so is by sounding more radical than the UK-wide party, although she also underlines how Welsh Labour’s “radical ambitions have been partly thwarted over the last few years by a sharp recentralisation of power in London by the Conservative government”. The other main factor, which explains why Labour has been more successful in Wales than in Scotland, is that “the Welsh Labour Party has been able to promote a form of ‘Welsh branding’, allowing it to successfully compete with Plaid Cymru, the nationalist party”. In this, she agrees with Simpkins’s contention that being seen as representing and defending Scottish or Welsh interests is a major prerequisite for UK-wide parties at the devolved level.

14 Conversely, on the island of Ireland, the success of the Labour Party has been very limited. In Northern Ireland, because of the sectarian

divide and the hegemony of unionist and nationalist parties, the Labour party has no official candidates in the elections and has supported the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) with whom they collaborate in the House of Commons. Quite strikingly, Northern Irish citizens were not welcome in the Labour Party before 2003 when the Party’s ban on membership was lifted (McDonald 2003). In the Republic of Ireland, Labour was the main left-wing political party until the recent electoral success of Sinn Féin (2016). However, as was previously stated, Irish politics is characterized by a weak left and the Irish Labour Party, set up in 1912 in the wake of its British counterpart, was never as successful. In his article entitled “From Revolution to Conformity, The Rise and Crisis of the Irish Labour Party, 1912-2020”, Oliver Coquelin analyses the electoral successes and failures of the Irish Labour Party in the Irish Free State and then in the Republic of Ireland. He explores its origins in the trade union movement, the role it played in the Irish Revolution (1916-1923) and the way the Labour Party managed to play a part in Irish politics, mostly in coalition governments with more powerful political forces including both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. In spite of endeavours to adapt its strategies and ideology with a turn to the left in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and then to the centre in the 1990s in the wake of the British New Labour, it seems that the Party never managed to prove its consistency and to overcome the lack of cohesion caused by the differing views of the more radicals and the more conservatives within the Party.

- 15 After examining the reasons for the contrasting success and failure of the Labour Party – one of the major mainstream parties of the UK – in different parts of the British and Irish Isles, the journal issue moves on to an analysis of why two of the main nationalist parties of these isles, namely the SNP and Sinn Féin, have both passed from a marginal position to one of dominance over their competitors.
- 16 Annie Thiec’s study of the SNP, entitled “The SNP’s conundrum over a second independence referendum: Scotland’s future in Westminster’s hands”, covers the period since it became the dominant party in Scotland. Since the 2014 independence referendum, the party has been at the same time extremely successful in electoral terms and in terms of attracting new members, and repeatedly unsuccessful in terms of meeting its key objective of obtaining a new independence referen-

dum. It has managed to adapt its case for independence to a new (post-Brexit) political context in which unionism has been redefined in unitary terms, which partly explains its continued electoral dominance. However, it is still in search of a workable strategy for independence, which has already caused an internal crisis within the Scottish independence movement, and which could hurt the SNP’s chances at remaining the dominant party of Scotland in the near future.

- 17 In “Understanding nationalism through inclusionary populism: A comparative analysis of the SNP and Sinn Féin”, Michael Scanlan adopts a slightly wider timeframe, namely the period 2007-2023, “chosen due to the impact of the Global Financial Crisis and subsequent austerity programmes on the electoral fortunes of both parties”. This allows him to underline that both the SNP and Sinn Féin have managed to be electorally successful during a time of global crisis, with the article noting that both parties “used anti-austerity messages following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis to broaden their electoral appeal”. The novelty of the article, which compares two political parties that Scanlan describes as not only nationalist, but also populist, and more specifically inclusionary populist, is that it examines the role played by values in these parties’ electoral appeal, rather than focus on that played by constitutional and territorial issues (which has already been covered in existing literature). A key argument put forward in the article is that “examining the centrality of values to nationalist parties helps us to understand how these parties gain and maintain support”, with nationalist parties constituting a sub-category of parties for which their centrality is well-established. By contrast, Scanlan notes that he “has not been able to make particular linkage” between the SNP and Sinn Féin’s “populist logic and their electoral success”, which might be down to the article’s use of qualitative methods (the study of party elite interviews and party manifestos) as opposed to quantitative or mixed methods of analysis.
- 18 The following article also looks at the current success of Sinn Féin, with a focus on its “marketing strategy” this time. In “Women Rebranding Sinn Féin (2018-2022)”, Elodie Gallet examines the recent changes in the image of the republican party that were brought about by its new female leadership in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Gallet contends that the new leadership of Mary Lou McDon-

ald, who became President of Sinn Féin in 2018, and Michelle O’Neill, her Vice President and then Northern Ireland Deputy First Minister (2020-2022), was instrumental in the republican party’s unprecedented electoral successes. Indeed, the party has recently benefited from the fact that both women were not directly connected with the IRA, unlike their predecessors Gerry Adams, the historic President of the party (1983-2018) under whom McDonald was Vice president of Sinn Féin for nine years and Martin McGuinness, who was Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland for a decade (2007-2017).

- 19 Quite interestingly, in “Assessing the impact of a Sinn Féin government on the prospect of reunification”, Agnès Maillot recalls that the traditional political forces in the Republic of Ireland, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, would not “engage with Sinn Féin, in spite of the party’s robust electoral performance” in 2020. They denied the fact that Sinn Féin was a “normal party” because of the alleged consultative role of unelected senior republicans in the North<sup>1</sup>. This decision caused a representation crisis since the many people who voted in favour of Sinn Féin, which obtained the majority of popular votes, were overlooked when the government was formed. Maillot explains that McDonald and O’Neill have to navigate between an acknowledgement that violent struggle used to be necessary in the context of resistance against British oppression while repeating that Sinn Féin’s part was essential in the success of the Good Friday Agreement and that they now condemn the use of violence and sectarian conflict. For Maillot, the current leadership has never strayed away from Sinn Féin’s historical commitment to bring a United Ireland and its focus on an “Equality agenda” is piece and parcel of their proposal for a New Republic.
- 20 If traditional political forces such as Labour are currently kept in check by parties such as Sinn Féin and the SNP, which are both nationalist parties as well as populist ones (as argued by Scanlan), it is at least in part because they pose as advocates of whole peoples; but does it mean that they provide for a better representation of their voters? In “The SNP, Brexit and immigration: a crisis of political representation in Scotland?”, Edwige Camp-Pietrain aims to query the very idea of a crisis of representative democracy in Scotland, as well as looking into the links between multilevel governance and the SNP’s claims to the existence of what it has termed a “democratic deficit” in

Scotland. She notes that in Scotland, there is a crisis of political representation in the sense that, with the SNP being the dominant party at all electoral levels, including the UK one, the Conservative-led government in London is not representative of a majority of Scots. This lack of representativeness is compounded by the fact that this is a government which has sought to redefine the devolution settlement in ways which reduce Scottish representatives’ input into decision-making processes. To quote Camp-Pietrain, “Conservative-led governments imposed their policies over reserved matters – whereas they used to consult their Scottish counterparts – and over some devolved matters ‘repatriated’ from Brussels – where they had refrained from interfering until then.” However, while Camp-Pietrain shows the extent to which the SNP can be described as representative of the whole of Scotland in both territorial and social terms, as well as the extent to which the SNP has gone against the grain of a “crisis of political parties” in that it recently experienced a huge rise in its membership, she also argues that the SNP’s policy preferences do not adequately reflect Scottish majority opinion on all issues. This, she demonstrates by taking the example of the issue of immigration, on which there is less difference of opinion between the Scottish and English populations than at the level of political elites. The SNP’s limited representativeness in the field of immigration is hidden from view by the fact that this being a reserved issue, it is an issue with low salience in Scotland; it could however become more apparent if Scotland became independent and immigration became an area of responsibility of the Scottish government. In the end, the article questions what it means for a party to be fully representative, and therefore on what bases claims to a “crisis of political representation” can be made.

- 21 Another party that seems to have benefited from the recent crisis of traditional political parties is the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, which is a non-sectarian party only organised in Northern Ireland. In “The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland: has its day come?”, Christophe Gillissen looks at the history of the Alliance Party, its previous difficulties to appeal to polarised voters during the Troubles, and its post-Brexit performance that has made it into a third force in Northern Ireland, ahead of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the SDLP, with between 13.5% and 18.5% of the votes since 2019. In 2022 the Al-

liance Party managed to secure more votes than ever with 17 seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly that were seized from the two unionist parties (DUP and UUP), but also from the SDLP and the Greens. Gillissen explains that the centrist party seems to have benefitted from disillusionment in the unionist parties in Northern Ireland – especially from those supporting the Remain side in the Brexit referendum<sup>2</sup> – and the growth of a “middle ground” mostly made up of young progressive voters who are reluctant to identify with either the unionist or the nationalist community. Such voters are also extremely weary of the traditional political cleavages causing months of unfruitful suspensions of the Northern Ireland consociational institutions<sup>3</sup>. However, the Alliance Party’s success could be limited in the future because of the workings of the power-sharing assembly with a focus on the nationalist and unionist political groups, and the prospect of a referendum on a United Ireland that would be a conundrum for the neutral – though previously unionist – political party.

- 22 In 2022, for the first time since the creation of the Parliament of Northern Ireland (1921-1972) and the Northern Ireland Assembly (from 1998), unionist parties did not win an election. In “A crisis in Unionism? The search for new foundations to Unionism in Northern Ireland”, Nolwenn Rousvoal argues that the poor electoral results of 2022 for the unionist parties are consistent with chronic issues affecting the unionist movement in Northern Ireland. Despite an attempt to have a more democratic structural organisation and to reach out to lower classes, unionism (especially as embodied by the DUP) suffers from the gap between a very conservative and remote political elite and the population in Northern Ireland whose down-to-earth concerns they do not seem to understand. Commenting on politics in Ireland, Chubb underlined the fact that many “political parties seem not to be in themselves particularly democratic organisations, though they are essential engines of democracy. Nor are they effective channels for public participation in politics” (Chubb 1993, 107). If unionism does not become more inclusive, it seems that the attempt to federate with a “connected unionism” across the UK – such as, for example, academic John Wilson Foster trying to reach out to Scottish unionists in *The Idea of the Union: Statements and Critiques* (Wilson 1995; 2021) – will not be sufficient to stem the crisis.

---

## Bibliography

Chubb, Basil (1993). *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Curtice, John (2023). “A Broken Link? Support for Independence and the SNP”, What Scotland Thinks blog, 11 April 2023, <<https://www.whatscotlandthinks.org/2023/04/a-broken-link-support-for-independence-and-the-snp/>>. Consulted on 10 October 2023.

Daalder, Hans (December 1992). “A crisis of party?”, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 12, 4, 269-288.

De Leon, Cedric (2019). *Crisis: When Political Parties Lose the Consent to Rule*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Duclos Nathalie (2020). “Le nationalisme écossais et l'identité politique du Scottish National Party”, in Alexandra Palau & Marc Smith (Eds.), *Processus de transformation et consolidation identitaires dans les sociétés européennes et américaines aux XX<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Louvain-la-Neuve : Éditions Academia - L'Harmattan, 79-102.

Gallagher, Michael (1985). *Political Parties in the Republic of Ireland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Gallagher, Michael & Michael Marsh (2004). “Party Membership in Ireland: The members of Fine Gael”, *Party Politics*, 10, 4.

Garner, Steve (2007). “Ireland and immigration: explaining the absence of the far right (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00313220701265486>)”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 41, 2, 109-130.

Hayward, Katy & Mary C., Murphy (2010). *The Europeanization of Party Politics in Ireland, North and South*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Hayward, Jack (1995). *The Crisis of Representation in Europe*, London: Frank Cass.

Ignazi, Piero (1996). “The Crisis of Parties and the Rise of New Political Parties”, *Party Politics*, 2, 4.

Johns, Rob & Mitchell, James (2016). *Takeover. Explaining the Extraordinary Rise of the SNP*. London: Biteback Publishing.

Katz, Richard S. & Peter Mair (1995), “Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party”, *Party Politics*, 1, 1.

Katz, Richard S. & William Crotty (2006/2009). *Handbook of Party Politics*, SAGE publications.

Kitschelt, Herbert (1988). “Left-Libertarian Parties: Explaining Innovation in Competitive Party Systems”, *World Politics*, 40, 194-234.

Kitschelt, Herbert (1990). “New Social Movements and the Decline of Party Organization”, in Dalton, Russell J. & Kuechler, Manfred, *Challenging the Political Order. New Social Movements in Western Democracies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 179-208.

Louvet, Marie-Violaine (2021). “Montée de l'extrême-droite dans les îles britanniques : la fin d'une exception irlandaise ?”, *Observatoire de la Société Britannique*, 26, 297-329.

McDonald, Henry (2003). “Now the Irish can join three Labour parties”, *The Guardian*, 5 October 2003.

Moran, Michael (2017). *The End of British Politics?*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

O'Malley, Eoin (2008). “Why is there no radical right party in Ireland? (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402380802234631>)”, *West European Politics*, vol.31, 5, 960-977.

Ryden David K (1996). *Representation in Crisis: The Constitution, Interest Groups, and Political Parties*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Sartori, Giovanni (1976). *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, Martin (2014). “A crisis of political parties” in David Richards, Martin Smith, Colin Hay (Eds.), *Institutional Crisis in 21st Century Britain*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tarrow, Sidney G (1989). *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965-1975*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Webb, Paul (2005). “Political parties and democracy: The ambiguous crisis”, *Democratization*, 12, 5, 633-650.

Wilson Foster, John (1995 2021). *The Idea of the Union: Statements and Critique*, Vancouver: Belcouver Press.

---

1 Simon Carswell, “Why are Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil refusing to go into coalition with Sinn Féin?”, *The Irish Times*, 26 January 2020.

2 In the run-up to the Brexit referendum, the main unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party, was in favour of Brexit whereas the Ulster Unionist Party was on the Remain side. After the result of the referendum, the Ulster Unionist Party said that they accepted the will of the British people and sided with the DUP against the pro-Remain nationalists.

3 The Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended between 2017 and 2020 after Martin McGuinness' resignation as Deputy First minister and again in 2022 because of unionist objections to the Northern Ireland Protocol in the wake of Brexit.

**Marie-Violaine Louvet**

MCF Civilisation irlandaise et britannique, Unité de recherche « Centre for Anglophone Studies » (EA 801), Maison de la Recherche, Université Toulouse Jean-Jaurès, 5 Allées Antonio Machado, 31 058 Toulouse Cedex  
IDREF : <https://www.idref.fr/181787598>

**Nathalie Duclos**

Professeur des Universités, Unité de recherche « Centre for Anglophone Studies » (EA 801), Maison de la Recherche, Université Toulouse Jean-Jaurès, 5 Allées Antonio Machado, 31 058 Toulouse Cedex  
IDREF : <https://www.idref.fr/078764769>  
HAL : <https://cv.archives-ouvertes.fr/nathalie-duclos>  
ISNI : <http://www.isni.org/0000000116754331>  
BNF : <https://data.bnf.fr/fr/15568612>