

Northern Ireland's Snap Assembly Elections: Outcome and Implications

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On March 2, 2017, voters in Northern Ireland—which is one of four component "nations" of the United Kingdom (UK)—went to the polls in snap elections for Northern Ireland's Assembly, its regional legislature. The Assembly is a key institution in Northern Ireland's devolved government, in which specified powers have been transferred from London to Belfast, as set out in the [1998 peace agreement](#) aimed at ending Northern Ireland's 30-year sectarian conflict (in which almost 3,500 people died). The peace accord mandated that power in the devolved government would be shared between Northern Ireland's two dominant communities: *unionists*, or Protestants who largely define themselves as British and support remaining part of the UK, and *nationalists*, or Catholics who consider themselves Irish and may desire a united Ireland. (For more information, see CRS Report RS21333, [Northern Ireland: The Peace Process](#).)

Since 2007, Assembly elections have produced successive power-sharing governments led by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the nationalist all-Ireland political party Sinn Fein. Assembly elections determine the composition of Northern Ireland's Executive, comprised of ministers in charge of policy departments. Following the May 2016 Assembly elections, DUP leader Arlene Foster and Sinn Fein's northern leader Martin McGuinness returned to head the Executive as First Minister and Deputy First Minister, respectively.

Despite a much-improved security situation in Northern Ireland and progress in implementing important aspects of the peace accord, significant divisions and distrust persist between the unionist and nationalist communities and their respective political parties. In January 2017, a [scandal over an incentives program for renewable energy](#), initially overseen by Foster when she served as Northern Ireland's Enterprise Minister, sparked the collapse of the devolved government. Sinn Fein called for Foster to temporarily stand aside as First Minister while an investigation was conducted into the energy scheme; she refused, and [McGuinness resigned](#) in protest. Under the rules governing Northern Ireland's power-sharing arrangements, if either the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister resigns (without a replacement being nominated), the government cannot continue and [new elections](#) must be held.

Tensions with the DUP on several other issues likely contributed to Sinn Fein's decision to force snap Assembly elections. The elections were called amid [continued uncertainty](#) over the implications for Northern Ireland of "Brexit"—the UK's expected exit from the European Union (EU). The DUP was the only major Northern Ireland political party to back Brexit ahead of the June 2016 referendum, and Northern Ireland voted 56% to 44% against leaving the EU (the

UK overall voted in favor by 52% to 48%). Other points of contention included legislation on an Irish Language Act (to give the Irish language the same official status as English) and on legalizing same-sex marriage; both are supported by Sinn Fein but opposed by the DUP.

Election Results

As a result of previously-agreed reforms, the number of Assembly seats contested in 2017 decreased from 108 to 90. Although the DUP retained the largest number of seats, [Sinn Fein emerged as the biggest winner](#) given its success in reducing the previous gap between the two parties from 10 seats to 1. A high [voter turnout](#) of almost 65%—fueled by anger over the energy scandal, a [perceived lack of concern from London](#) about Brexit's impact on Northern Ireland, and nationalists' resentment of DUP warnings [likening Sinn Fein to a "crocodile"](#)—appears to have favored Sinn Fein and the smaller cross-community Alliance Party.

Northern Ireland: Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)

Political Party	2016 Elections	2017 Elections
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP; hard-line unionist, conservative)	38	28
Sinn Fein (SF; hard-line nationalist, left-wing)	28	27
Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP; moderate nationalist, center-left)	12	12
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP; moderate unionist, center-right)	16	10
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI; nonsectarian, centrist/liberal)	8	8
Green Party (nonsectarian; left-wing)	2	2
People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA; nonsectarian, left-wing)	2	1
Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV; hard-line unionist, right-wing)	1	1
Independent (unionist)	1	1
Total	108	90

Sources: For election results, see BBC, "[NI Election 2016](#)" and "[NI Election 2017](#)."

For the first time in the Assembly, [unionist parties will not have an overall majority](#) (a largely symbolic status because of the power-sharing rules). With fewer than 30 seats, the DUP also lost its unilateral ability to trigger a "[petition of concern](#)," a procedure recently used by the DUP to block legislation on social policy issues, including same-sex marriage. At the same time, the election results reinforce the DUP and Sinn Fein as the dominant voices for their respective communities, suggesting continued and possibly increased polarization in Northern Ireland's politics.

Next Steps and Implications

The DUP and Sinn Fein now have three weeks to form a new power-sharing Executive. Negotiations are expected to be fraught. [Sinn Fein leaders](#)—including party president Gerry Adams and new northern leader Michelle O'Neill—maintain that they will not accept Arlene Foster as First Minister until she is cleared of any wrongdoing related to the energy scandal. The DUP contends that Sinn Fein cannot dictate who the DUP puts forward as First Minister. Without a power-sharing agreement within three weeks, new elections technically would have to be called. Many experts view another election as unlikely and suggest that the UK government would seek to pass legislation to give the parties [more time for negotiations](#). Although UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland James Brokenshire asserts that he is not contemplating a return of "direct rule" from London, some analysts suggest that this looms as a possibility should negotiations remain deadlocked.

The 2017 election results likely will prompt [renewed questions about Northern Ireland's status](#) within the UK and could have implications for the UK government's upcoming Brexit negotiations. Many on both sides of Northern Ireland's sectarian divide worry that Brexit could lead to a return of a "hard" land border (with customs and security checks) with EU-member Ireland and negatively affect the cross-border economy. Thus, Sinn Fein argues that "[Brexit changes everything](#)" and could lead to greater support for a united Ireland. Although most experts believe that the conditions required to hold a "border poll" on Northern Ireland's constitutional status do not currently exist, the election results are a boost for nationalists. In the short term, the results also could embolden nationalists and others to push harder for some sort of "[special status](#)" for Northern Ireland within the EU following the UK's expected withdrawal.