

Bi-Confessionalism in a Confessional Party System: The Northern Ireland Alliance Party

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I INTRODUCTION

In a comparative context a bi-polar conflict is rare, especially when it takes the form of a conflict between two intractably opposed and self-sufficient communities ranged around a single, all-pervasive, cleavage. As issues capable of compromise remain unresolved in the political system due to their sub-ordination to the dominant problem, they reinforce one another and serve to exacerbate polarisation. Extremism and anti-system oppositions are likely to flourish and be encouraged by the tendency of the two communities to isolate their respective followers from conflicting stimuli. This process is achieved by further intensifying the saliency of the dominant cleavage, hence making any prospect of change in the system, however small, even more remote (Dahl, 1973).

Among Western European democracies the Northern Ireland political system is the best example of a bi-polar conflict. The two religious communities face one another in a conflict that is both perpetual and zero-sum. Although the political parties eschew religious titles, virtually all are confessional in so far as they attract the exclusive support of one or other

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community. The justification for dichotomising the society into two religious communities rests on the fact that it is a functional division which corresponds to the province's social organisation. This has been demonstrated by the work of Barritt and Carter (1962), Harris (1972) and Darby (1976), among others. More specialised research has shown that religious segregation extends into social habits and patterns (Boal, 1969). Other studies have, while confirming this, added the caveat that differences *within* communities can be as marked as the differences *between* communities (Rose, 1971; Harris, 1972; Boal, 1971).

The Alliance Party is a deviant in the Northern Ireland party system. While the political parties on both sides of the sectarian divide are confessional, the Alliance Party seeks bi-confessional support on a cross-class basis from both religious communities. As such, the closest comparison that can be made to it among Western European political parties is the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which emerged in 1946 as a single claim party seeking bi-confessional and cross-class support (see Loewenberg, 1971). Like the founders of the Alliance Party, those who formed the CDU saw their aim as reducing the saliency of religion—expressed either through interdenominational conflict or conflict between clerical and anti-clerical groups—in political debate.

The Alliance Party thus represents a third political tendency in the Northern Ireland party system, in so far as it occupies a position equidistant from the two religious blocs, at a point where moderate Catholic and moderate Protestant attitudes overlap. The Alliance Party raises several questions of importance for research into Northern Ireland politics. For example, does a third bi-confessional tendency exist, expressed by the Alliance Party and manifested in the form of broad agreement on a wide range of issues? To what extent does the composition of the party reflect the religious balance within Northern Ireland? How does the party see its role in the political system and what implications does this have for the party's strategy? To seek to answer these questions, this paper utilises the results of a postal survey of Alliance candidates in the 1973 general elections.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first part examines the sample and questionnaire and the second part the candidates' social and political characteristics. The third part analyses the candidates' political attitudes and the final part focuses on their perceptions of the party's role in the political system. The remainder of this introduction outlines the political background to the formation of the Alliance Party.

Few historical parallels exist in Northern Ireland party politics with which to compare the Alliance Party. Other attempts to diminish the saliency of the religious cleavage by attracting bi-confessional support have all tried to

cross-cut it. The closest example to Alliance, the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), has endeavoured to replace religion with class values, but its lack of success and transient vote has shown that little future exists for any party that tries to emphasise a cleavage that is not coterminous with, or closely adjacent to, the religious divide (see Rutan, 1967; Graham, 1972). Prior to the mid-1960s the middle ground of Ulster politics was occupied by the NILP. After that date, however, the accession of Terence O'Neill to the leadership of the Unionist Party in 1963 ushered in an era of *détente* that gradually eroded the NILP's political momentum. Although O'Neill took, what were in Ulster terms, unprecedented steps to gain inter-communal support, he was unable to persuade his party to formally accede to Catholic membership within the party structures, nor did Catholics come forward in any number publicly to endorse his government.¹

In practical terms the 1969 Stormont general election simultaneously marked the failure of O'Neill's attempt to liberalise the Unionist Party and presaged the emergence of the Alliance Party. At one level the election demonstrated the reluctance of the Unionist Party to endorse conciliatory policies and implied that O'Neill's attempt to reform the Unionist Party 'from the top down' was untenable at that time. In the future, therefore, liberal Unionist policies could only be advanced through the medium of a new political party. At another level, the election provided the motivation for the formation of the New Ulster Movement (NUM), a pressure group dedicated to actively supporting O'Neill's policy of conciliation. Disorganised and relatively uninfluential in its initial stages, the activities of the NUM had little effect on the outcome of the election. The group did, however, bring together a small nucleus of like-minded liberal unionists, who, after the resignation of O'Neill, felt morally free to transform the NUM into a political party to compete with the Unionist Party for electoral support.

The formation of the Alliance Party in April 1970 was, specifically, the consequence of planning carried out by a small caucus elected from NUM constituency representatives. In more general terms, it was the consequence of events and precedents that had emanated from the NILP and the O'Neill era. Alliance's formation marked the rejection of the Unionist Party as a medium for reform and the creation of formal, open structures to permit the

1. Although it had been an issue in 1959, when the Unionist Party's annual conference came out against Catholic involvement in the party (despite the fact that there were then some Catholic members), the question was never again formally raised during O'Neill's premiership. The most notorious case of Unionist discrimination against a Catholic member was that of Louis Boyle who failed to gain a Unionist nomination in Co. Down, but who was not denied party membership. See Boyd (1972) and Rose (1971, p. 224). Rose's 1968 survey (1971, p. 235) found that only 5 per cent of Catholic respondents identified with the Unionist Party.

participation of individuals from both communities. The idea that the political system could be reformed through a political party engaging in electoral competition was substantially a legacy of the NILP. The legacy of O'Neillism was to see the creation of a political party that, although supporting the constitutional link with Britain sought Catholic support. Uniquely, Alliance regarded bi-confessionalism as the central tenet of its political philosophy (see Wilson, 1976, Ch.2).

II SAMPLE AND QUESTIONNAIRE

To test the scope and depth of the Alliance Party's bi-confessionalism using survey techniques presents several problems. First, all the surveys conducted in Northern Ireland since Alliance's emergence in 1970 incorporating a statistically significant number of Alliance identifiers have either focused on a particular section of the population, or produced an unreliable sample.² Secondly, administering a postal questionnaire to the party membership is not feasible, given that the names and addresses of party members remain confidential for both political and security reasons. Thirdly, alternative methods, such as circulating questionnaires during party meetings or annual conferences raise the obvious problem of the representativeness of the resulting sample. The compromise alternative used here was to administer a postal questionnaire to the 1973 District Council and Assembly election candidates, the names and addresses of whom were published with the official nomination papers.

The use of a sample of party candidates to make inferences about a political party does, however, raise other basic methodological problems. Various studies have produced data to suggest that candidates in particular, and party élites in general, are not representative, socially or attitudinally, of the party membership or its followers.³ But it may be argued that the structure of the Alliance Party is such as to make it largely immune from the oligarchic tendencies of organisation, hence making it valid to draw inferential statements about the party as a whole from a survey of its election candidates. John D. May (1973) has pointed out how political attitudes vary from

2. The Irish Mobility Survey, carried out in 1973, included a partisanship question, but excluded females. A survey conducted in July 1972 by Carrick James Market Research for *Fortnight* and *The Sunday Times* also included a partisanship question, but produced a biased sample. The two most recent surveys, conducted by National Opinion Polls in March 1974 and March 1976, omitted a partisanship question. A large scale academic survey funded by the Ford Foundation and currently being designed by members of the Political Science Department, Queen's University, Belfast, should remedy this gap.

3. On Britain, see Birch (1959) and Bealey *et al.* (1965). On the United States, see McCloskey *et al.* (1960).

stratum-to-stratum within a political party, and how the 'top leaders occupy an intermediate position between the median opinions of their sub-leaders and their non-leaders' (May, 1973, p. 139; see also Eldersveld, 1964). May is, however, concerned with hierarchical parties, and of the four basic structural patterns to which parties adhere—hierarchical, egalitarian, polyarchical and pyramidal—the Alliance Party occupies a position midway between the latter two. In other words, like a polyarchical party, its structure is partially ordered, yet unlike a pyramidal party it is not completely transitive (Mansbach, 1973). This structural pattern means, therefore, that the channels towards upward mobility within the Alliance Party remain open and the attitudinal heterogeneity of hierarchically organised parties is largely absent.⁴

The questionnaire was issued at the beginning of May 1976 to the 248 Alliance candidates in the 1973 District Council and Assembly elections. As this information was three years old, it was anticipated that a certain proportion of non-contacts would result. This did not in fact occur and only 14 questionnaires were returned undelivered with a further 4 respondents having died. One formal refusal was also received. The possible response was therefore reduced to 230 persons, from whom 162 completed questionnaires were received, yielding a response rate of 70.4 per cent. This level of response was considerably higher than that recorded for the majority of postal surveys (see Blumberg *et al*, 1974) and compares favourably with the response rates for major British surveys.

III SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The religious composition of the sample is given in Table 1, against the comparable figures for the 1971 census. Consonant with its claims as a party that unites the communities, the data clearly illustrate that the sample of election candidates did include members of all the major religious denominations, in proportions close to those found in the population as a whole. Two further points are worthy of note. First, Presbyterians were proportionately under-represented, a fact not altogether surprising since research has indicated that this denomination tends to be the most strongly Unionist and therefore the least likely to formally associate with Catholics (see Budge and O'Leary, 1973, p. 243; McAllister, 1976, p. 464). Secondly, the percentage of those professing no religious affiliation was, at 9 per cent (with 2 per cent also refusing to give their religion), considerably more than the population as a whole. The figures for church attendance were also close to those found in 4. The Alliance Party structure most closely resembles that of the Scottish National Party, the main difference being that while the SNP constitution makes the annual conference 'the governing body of the party', the Alliance annual conference has no constitutionally defined powers.

Table 1: *Religious composition*

Religion	<i>Alliance</i> (1976)	<i>Northern Ireland Census</i> (1971)
Roman Catholic	33	31
Presbyterian	20	27
Church of Ireland	24	22
Other Protestant	12	11
None/Refused	11	9
Total	100	100
(N)	(162)	(1,519,640)

the general population; 40 per cent of the Protestant respondents and 92 per cent of the Catholics attended a religious service once a week or more, compared to 46 per cent and 95 per cent, respectively, recorded in Rose's survey. Of the remaining majority of Protestant respondents, 16 per cent attended at least monthly and 31 per cent very infrequently, compared to 18 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively, recorded by Rose (1971, p. 264).

The prior political involvement of the Alliance candidates broadly corresponds to their religious and cultural backgrounds, the largest group of Protestants supporting the Unionist Party, the largest group of Catholics, the Nationalists. The strength of political identification among the two groups was, however, less than that of the society as a whole: Rose's 1968 survey, for example, found that 79 per cent of Protestants supported the Unionist Party, 51 per cent of Catholics, the Nationalists (1971, p. 235). It is also notable that, of the three parties listed, only the NILP gained a significant level of inter-communal support. The prior party membership of the respondents is also significant because it points to the amount of political experience existing within the Alliance Party in its initial years. A majority had no party affiliation prior to Alliance, and thus it would seem to have recruited persons previously unaffiliated, either through youth or disinclination, into the party.⁵ The low level of party membership among Catholics is hardly surprising given the absence of organisation in the Nationalist Party, which rarely afforded the opportunity for formal membership. The numbers involved with the Ulster Liberal Party are notable, recalling its miniscule support in the 1960s (the party does not appear in the voting in-

5. Youth, however, does not appear to be a factor in this. The respondents fell largely into the 40 to 49 age group (28 per cent) and the 50 to 59 age group (31 per cent). Only 18 per cent were aged between 30 and 39.

Table 2: *Prior political involvement*

	<i>Religion</i>		
	<i>Protestant</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Other/None</i>
(a) Voting Intention			
Unionist Party	48	2	28
Nationalist Party	—	37	4
NILP	25	30	24
Abstained	6	9	20
Seat not Contested/ Other/None	20	22	24
Total	100	100	100
(b) Party Membership			
Unionist Party	32	2	8
Ulster Liberal Party	2	4	12
Nationalist Party	—	4	—
NILP	4	11	4
Other/None	61	80	76
Total	100	100	100
(N)	(83)	(54)	(25)

tention table because it never contested more than a handful of constituencies in local, provincial or Westminster elections). Indeed, much of the initial impetus towards the formation of the Alliance Party came from former Liberals: the party's present leader, Oliver Napier, was a Liberal member from 1961 until 1969.

Few Alliance critics have suggested that the party is anything other than bi-confessional, a fact emphasised by the religious composition of the sample. Numerous critics have, however, made the claim that the party, like political parties almost everywhere, is predominantly middle class. The occupational structure of the Alliance respondents suggested that this was the case, with almost 75 per cent of the sample falling into either the higher or lower professional grades. A supplementary pattern was apparent if occupation was controlled for by religion. Catholics tended to be spread equally in the higher and lower professional grades and in the clerical grade, while Protestants were heavily concentrated (59 per cent) in the lower professional grade. This pattern which gives Catholics a generally lower occupational status

when compared to Protestants is also reflected in the population as a whole (see Augner, 1975; Boyle, 1977).

Another method of measuring social class is to take a number of socio-economic criteria, in this case trade union affiliation, house tenure, educational attainment and subjective class assessment, and compare the sample with the general population, in this case again represented by Rose's 1968 survey. It can be seen from Table 3 that only in trade union membership did the candidates reflect the composition of the society as a whole. The

Table 3: *Four criteria of class*

	<i>Alliance</i> (1976)	<i>Loyalty survey</i> (1968)
(a) Trade Union		
Member	43	45
Non-Member	57	54
Total	100	100
(b) House Tenure		
Owner Occupier	79	42
Rent from Council	12	32
Rent Privately	5	22
Other	4	4
Total	100	100
(c) Age Left School		
15 and under	18	71
16-18	36	22
Over 18	46	7
Total	100	100
(d) Subjective Social Class		
Middle Class	66	47
Working Class	32	31
Don't Know	2	22
Total	100	100
(N)	(162)	(1,291)

Source: Loyalty Survey figures from Rose (1971, pp 500-505).

other criteria all suggest a middle class bias with education—measured by the age the respondent ceased full-time education—being particularly marked. In the population only 7 per cent received education over the age of 18, but in the Alliance sample this figure rose to 46 per cent. A large proportion of the respondents also possessed educational qualifications: no less than 28 per cent had a university degree and a further 20 per cent a teaching diploma or similar formal qualification.

Although the Alliance Party has probably as many female members among its membership as are likely to be found in any Ulster political party, only limited numbers are prepared to stand for elective office, a common characteristic. The percentage of female candidates at the 1973 District Council election (27 per cent) was higher than that for any other political party, the overall percentage of female candidates being 11 per cent (Lawrence *et al*, 1975, p. 26). Moreover, although Catholic females tend to be one of the most politically inactive groups, they were not significantly under-represented among the females in the Alliance sample, 23 per cent of whom were Catholic.

IV POLITICAL ATTITUDES

A major aim of the survey was to analyse how the candidates perceived identifiable political, social and economic issues. The intention was to assess whether the party was single claim in nature, with its policies representing little more than the highest common denominator, or whether a cohesive or consistent view existed, reflected by a broad agreement on a variety of issues. To test attitudes and to try and measure the diversity or cohesiveness of party opinion, seven questions covering separate issues were included. Table 4 lists the questions and the responses they elicited. The overall impression is of lack of disagreement among respondents. Three of the questions—attitudes towards the trade unions, the European Economic Community and integrated education—produced practically no dissent, while the other four questions all produced a majority of at least 20 per cent in favour of one of the possible alternatives. As it is possible that divisions within the sample are lost in aggregation, the issues were also examined in relation to three variables: religion, class and region of residence.

Religion would be expected to exercise the strongest influence within the sample; there is the possibility that a respondent would, when pressurised by increasing religious polarisation, return to the political tradition in which he or she had been brought up. Despite the fact that a political party can

Table 4: Responses to issue questions

	<i>Support for Declining Industry</i>	<i>Comprehensive Education</i>	<i>Integrated Education</i>
Approve	36	58	97
Disapprove	62	36	3
Don't Know	2	6	—
Total	100	100	100
(N)	(162)	(162)	(162)
	<i>Trade Unions</i>	<i>EEC Membership</i>	
Good thing	81	88	
Bad thing	4	6	
Neither good nor bad	15	6	
Total	100	100	
(N)	(162)	(162)	
	<i>Increase Taxation or Reduce Social Services</i>		
Increase Taxes	57		
Reduce Social Services	35		
Don't Know	8		
Total	100		
(N)	(162)		
	<i>Irish Government's Security Measures</i>		
Unfairly Repressive	—		
About Right	60		
Not Strong Enough	36		
Totally Inadequate	4		
Total	100		
(N)	(162)		

bring together members of both communities, it does not necessarily follow that deep religious divisions are eradicated.⁶ How deep, therefore, is the commitment to non-sectarian politics? To measure the influence of religion, the sample was divided into Catholic and non-Catholic and their respective

6. This is aptly illustrated by the religious divisions that have frequently emerged in pressure groups formed for the explicit purpose of bringing the two communities together. The best examples are the experience of Protestant and Catholic Encounter (PACE) and more recently, the Peace Movement.

responses to the seven issue questions compared. On only two issues was there a difference of more than 5 per cent in the responses of the two groups. These were comprehensive education, which was supported by 71 per cent of the Catholics compared to 51 per cent of the non-Catholics, and attitudes to the Irish government's security measures which 71 per cent of the Catholics felt were 'about right' compared to 53 per cent of non-Catholics. If fundamental differences did exist between the two groups, they would have almost certainly become apparent in attitudes towards integrated education. This did not occur and a remarkable consensus of opinion emerged with 94 per cent of Catholics and 99 per cent of the non-Catholics in favour.

In sum, the issue questions produced little disagreement between the two religions. Some divisions were apparent between them, however, in responses to other questions. For example, when asked their voting intention in England, a plurality of Catholics chose the Labour Party, while the largest support among non-Catholics went to the Conservatives. In addition, when asked which class they thought themselves belonging to, a plurality of Catholics (46 per cent) considered themselves working class, compared to 22 per cent of non-Catholics. This stronger class consciousness among Catholic respondents would account for their higher support for the Labour Party. But, in general, religion is not a divisive force in socio-economic issues and on many questions, including the potentially divisive one of integrated education, members are in agreement.

Assessing the influence of occupational class presented practical difficulties, given the respondents' predominant middle-class backgrounds and the small numbers following working-class occupations. Overall, the issue questions suggested that the working-class members were in agreement with the sample as a whole. The only notable difference emerged with the amount of support the middle- and working-class candidates would give to the Labour Party in England; here 65 per cent of the working-class would vote for Labour in England, compared to 31 per cent for the total sample.

A more important influence than occupational class was subjective class identification. One-third of all those who indicated a class identified themselves as working class. The group included a doctor, an insurance broker, a number of teachers and civil servants, and others not objectively classifiable as working class. Several differences were apparent. Contrary to what might have been expected, the subjective working class were less likely to support declining industry, although on all other issues the subjective working-class attitudes tended towards the left. This was particularly apparent in relation to taxation and comprehensive education. Table 5 indicates that while more than three-quarters of the subjective working class supported an increase in taxation, less than half of the middle class supported this view and on the

Table 5: *Subjective working class*

	<i>Subjective class</i>	
	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Working class</i>
Support for Increased Taxes	46	75
Support for Social Service Cuts	41	24
Don't Know	11	—
Total	100	100
Support for Comprehensive Education	45	78
Oppose Comprehensive Education	48	14
Don't Know	6	8
Total	100	100
(N)	(102)	(49)

comprehensive education issue a majority of both groups took opposing views. Whereas only one in seven of the subjective working class opposed comprehensive education, a plurality of the middle class took this view.

Nor surprisingly, voting intention in England also displayed differences: 47 per cent of the subjective working class would support the Labour Party, compared to 31 per cent of the sample as a whole. In general, however, there was little indication that subjective class presented a serious division within the party. Although the subjective working class had more easily identifiable attitudes on a number of issues, such as comprehensive education and taxation, on most issues their views corresponded to the overall party trend. It is likely that the group acts as a balance in policy and decision-making to the overall middle-class orientation of the party.

The third and final variable tested against the issue questions was region of residence. Region is a potent factor in shaping political outlook, especially in countries with a large rural population. In recent years an increasingly voluminous literature on political personnel has attested to its importance in the Irish Republic.⁷ To assess its influence on the Alliance candidates, the sample was divided between those residing in the Belfast region (including North Down and South Antrim) and those residing in the rest of the province. The issue questions showed that while the majority of respondents in both regions concurred in their views, there was some variation in the degree of support. On all the issue questions, with the exceptions of those on integrated education, the European Economic Community and the Irish government's security measures, those living outside the Belfast region took a more conservative view. For example, while those in Belfast (69 per cent) favoured

7. See for example, Chubb (1963), Schmitt (1973), Bax (1976) and Sacks (1976). For evidence of its existence in Northern Ireland see McAllister (1977, Ch.V).

increased taxation instead of a reduction in social services, there was a more even balance outside Belfast (45 to 44 per cent); this was also the case with comprehensive education, which 67 per cent supported in Belfast, compared to 44 per cent outside Belfast.

Although these figures indicate that the degree of support for various policies differed considerably between those living in Belfast and its environs and those living outside, there was no issue on which the views of the majority in each area were not in agreement. But the data did suggest that those living outside Belfast were more conservative, and this was confirmed by the response to the question on party support in England. Outside Belfast, 39 per cent supported the Conservative Party, compared to 19 per cent in Belfast. In general, the source of this conservatism appeared to be innate rather than the consequence of either undue affluence or depression: levels of occupation, education, subjective class, religion and housing did not significantly differ from those found in the Belfast area.

Few divisions therefore existed on the seven issue questions when examined in relation to religion, class and region. In sum, the respondents' attitudes were notable for the broad agreement they displayed. One further measure of the extent to which a cohesive third political tendency exists are the responses to a question on national identity. National identity is an issue that underpins much of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and it has been shown to substantially reflect the political aspirations of the individual (Rose, 1971, Ch. VI). It is thus constructive to compare Rose's findings with those of the Alliance survey.

Two points emerge from Table 6. First, there was a lack of agreement between all three groups about which category to choose. Secondly, although

Table 6: *National identities*

	<i>Religion</i>			
	<i>Protestant</i>		<i>Catholic</i>	
	<i>Alliance</i> (1976)	<i>Loyalty survey</i> (1968)	<i>Alliance</i> (1976)	<i>Loyalty survey</i> (1968)
British	26	39	18	15
Irish	17	20	44	76
Ulster	12	32	9	5
Sometimes Irish/ Sometimes British	38	6	24	3
Other/Don't Know	6	3	4	1
Total	100	100	100	100
(N)	(83)	(757)	(54)	(534)

Source: Loyalty Survey figures from Rose (1971, p.208).

there was disagreement, the main choices for the two groups were moderated: for example, there was a drop in the number of Protestants calling themselves both British and Ulster, and a significant drop in the proportion of Catholics identifying themselves as Irish. In parallel with this was a substantial increase in those of both groups calling themselves 'Sometimes British/Sometimes Irish,' which, in the Protestant group, constituted the largest national identity. This conditional aspect to the national identity question—which was also the dominant Protestant attitude before partition—can best be explained by an awareness of the importance of the question to the continuing sectarian conflict, and thus an attempt to reduce its salience by blurring the issue.

V THE PARTY ROLE IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Although the Alliance Party advocates continued union with Britain, this constitutional position has not precluded Catholic participation in the organisation and in religious terms the party is genuinely bi-confessional. So far as the party operates as a link between the two larger sectarian blocs, electorally and politically it represents the furthest point to which individuals can give their support without crossing the sectarian divide (Laver, 1976, p. 23). For example, in an election Catholic voters who support traditional Catholic parties may well go on to list Alliance candidates in later preferences. But only in very few instances will voters actually cross the sectarian divide. The unwillingness of the Ulster electorate to transfer votes across the divide was shown in the Assembly and Convention elections, where the proportion of votes transferring between the Loyalist and Catholic blocs was in each case less than 1 per cent.

While the electorate views the Alliance Party as somewhere equidistant from the two major blocs, what ground did the Alliance candidates see their party occupying? And what implications do these perceptions have for the party's strategy within the Northern Ireland party system? To answer these questions, the questionnaire included a hypothetical ballot paper, and respondents were asked to list their party preferences, without regard to candidates, as in a proportional representation election. Like the electorate, Alliance respondents perceived the party as occupying the space midway between the two extremes of the Republican Clubs and the Democratic Unionists. Conversely, the parties considered most adjacent to Alliance were the Unionist Party of Northern Ireland (UPNI), the NILP and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). The actual listing of second preferences gave 38 per cent to the UPNI, 30 per cent to the NILP and 22 per cent to the SDLP. This leads to the question of how respondents made

an operational distinction between what they regarded as 'moderate' and what they regarded as 'extreme' parties. As Alliance's stated objective is to reconcile the two communities, it would seem that each party was judged by its views on power-sharing in government. Thus the parties which made up the ill-fated power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive in 1974—Alliance, SDLP and UPNI (then Faulkner Unionists)—were viewed closest to Alliance, and those parties which opposed it—the Official (then anti-White Paper) Unionists, Democratic and Vanguard Unionists—were defined as 'extreme' and farthest away.

This pattern of support was reflected in the manner in which the respondents apportioned their preferences. Table 7 shows how the party transfers went overwhelmingly to the three 'moderate' power-sharing parties, each of which obtained at least three-quarters of the second, third and fourth preferences. Least popular were the Republican Clubs, the United Ulster Unionist Movement and the Democratic Unionists, with the Official Unionists coming midway between the 'moderate' and 'extreme' parties. The position of the remaining party, Vanguard, is unclear in the minds of the respondents, due to the conversion of Vanguard to the power-sharing position, as exemplified by the voluntary coalition proposals propounded by William Craig during the latter stages of the 1975-76 Constitutional Convention, before this survey was undertaken.

Table 7: *Vote transfer preferences*

Party ^a	Preferences		
	2 to 4	5 to 6	7 to 9
SDLP	76	15	9
Republican Clubs	2	18	80
Official Unionist Party	5	51	44
Vanguard Unionist Party	30	47	23
United Ulster Unionist Movement	1	1	98
Democratic Unionist Party	1	7	92
Unionist Party of Northern Ireland	90	4	6
Northern Ireland Labour Party	83	9	8

^aThe party order is as it appeared on the questionnaire. The order was selected at random.

A supplementary pattern was apparent when the preferences were separated by religion. The two groups produced divergent patterns. For example, 35 per cent of Catholics listed their second preference for the SDLP, compared to 25 per cent for the UPNI; by contrast, only 16 per cent of non-Catholics gave the SDLP their second preference, compared to 48 per cent for the UPNI. These differences tended to equalise in later preferences, although it

is notable that at each stage the NILP attracted preferences in fairly equal proportions from each religious group.

The Alliance respondents tended to divide the political parties into two distinct groups: moderate parties like themselves and extreme parties. The fact that both Protestant (UPNI) and Catholic (SDLP) parties were in the moderate group to some extent reflects a shift in political attitudes among some of the electorate. Prior to the formation of the party, some Catholics were willing to vote for Protestant parties, mainly in the form of O'Neill and Independent Unionists, but there is no evidence of any sizeable Protestant support for a Catholic party. The fact that 60 per cent of Protestant Alliance respondents in the sample would cast up to a sixth preference for a Catholic party indicates that 'moderation' is more important than religion in determining the structure of preferences.

The analysis of the respondents' political preferences illustrates how they perceived the party as occupying the extreme of the two traditional political spectrums, that is the middle ground between the two sectarian blocs. However, a common link with the other parties supporting power-sharing was also discerned, and these parties are themselves linked to the sectarian blocs. Alliance strategy is thus to consciously exploit the role of mediator, at one level drawing upon the moderate aspects of each side's policies to formulate its own compromise solutions, at another level portraying itself as a bulwark against extremism and intolerance. This idea of seeking the middle position of Ulster politics, irrespective of the context of debate, represents much more than just seeking a lessening in the intensity of political conflict, for in practical terms it ensures a continuing role for the Alliance Party in the Northern Ireland party system.

VI CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what are the main findings of the survey of Alliance election candidates and what implications do they have for the party's role in the Ulster political system? First, the sample of candidates was bi-confessional in composition and although it is not possible to use this to draw any direct conclusions about the *composition* of the party's membership or followers, it is valid to infer that they are bi-confessional in *orientation*. This bi-confessionalism is central to the party's survival in the party system, for so long as religious divisions remain salient in Northern Ireland then there is a guaranteed role for a party which seeks to bridge this division. The representative number of Catholics in the sample also suggests that the party's pro-union constitutional stance has not precluded Catholic participation. Indeed, the fact that a strong stand is taken on the constitution (in contrast

to the equivocation shown by the NILP up until 1949) ensures that Alliance will receive support from Catholic opinion which endorses the union.⁸ It is also a natural political base on which to build a bi-confessional party since research has indicated that Catholics are more willing to cross the divide than Protestants.⁹

Secondly, the survey found that although differences existed within the sample on particular issues, few were of significance and of the three influences tested—religion, class and region of residence—only religion exerted any consistent influence. The strongest divergence of attitudes emerged on the national identity question, although here the overall tendency was for the respondents to moderate the extreme polarisation recorded in previous surveys. By contrast, on other issues, such as the contentious one of integrated education, virtually no divisions were apparent between the two religious groups. The relative unimportance of religion occurs because respondents have taken the decision to 'solve' the sectarian problem, at least in their own minds, by participating in a bi-confessional party. But conversely, no such positive agreement exists in relation to, for example, class, and hence this still exerts a potentially divisive influence. It is frequently suggested that if the sectarian problem were ever eradicated, and Alliance's *raison d'être* lost, then the party would disintegrate and the membership join the parties which would emerge to express both sides of the new political cleavage.

Thirdly, the survey found that the candidates, like the electorate, saw the party's role in the political system as a mediating one between the two sectarian blocs. This reflects the party strategy of creating a strong centre that overlaps with the power-sharing parties representing the two communities.¹⁰ In the early 1970s Alliance, like the SDLP, saw itself as 'a party of government', although it soon became clear that this was unrealistic; in any event, its self-defined balancing role is more appealing to a party that sees the future in a plural, rather than a majoritarian, society.

Do the survey findings suggest that a third political tendency exists in Northern Ireland politics? The survey did show a general homogeneity of

8. It is noteworthy that the introduction of the power-sharing concept has transformed the majority of Ulster Catholics who previously withheld consent from the regime, but who were prepared to comply with its basic political laws, into a majority of Ulster Catholics who will give both consent and compliance.

9. Opinion polls have consistently shown that a significant proportion of Catholics (largely in the middle and higher occupational grades) will vote for pro-union parties and that a corresponding Protestant tendency to vote for anti-partitionist parties is non-existent. In addition, the work of Rose (1971) and Nelson (1975) suggests that Catholics are more conciliatory in their attitudes than Protestants, although this is contradicted by O'Donnell (1976).

10. This may, however, as Sartori (1976) points out, further increase polarisation in the context of a bi-polar conflict. As the blocs are forced to differentiate themselves from the new party, they are driven further apart.

opinion on the range of issues tested rather than simply a coalition of divergent groups united around a small number of well defined goals. While the survey was conducted among candidates for elective office, who would be expected to possess a cohesive opinion structure, it is suggested that this cohesion stretches into the general party membership. It could also be hypothesised that it extends at a lesser level into the one-tenth of the electorate who are regular Alliance voters—although survey research has yet to produce evidence to confirm or deny this.

It is not unreasonable, however, to suspect that it does exist in the electorate to some degree: political research in Northern Ireland is normally structured towards quantifying conflict and dissonance rather than consensus and convergence. Budge and O'Leary's 1966 survey showed, for example, that party leaders consistently over-estimated the intransigence of their supporters; there is no reason to suppose that this is not still the case today within both communities. While limited in scope and range, this survey of Alliance candidates suggests that ascertaining the existence of a third political tendency in Ulster and measuring its extent and depth should have a major priority for future social science research. As has recently been suggested, "instead of talking just about Protestants and Catholics, researchers should ask themselves more often; *which* Protestants and *which* Catholics" (Whyte, 1976, p. 596).

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