



Northern Ireland's 2022 Assembly Election: Outcome and Implications

May 11, 2022

On May 5, 2022, voters in Northern Ireland—a part of the United Kingdom (UK)—went to the polls in elections for Northern Ireland's Assembly, its regional legislature. In a [landmark outcome](#), the all-Ireland Sinn Fein party—which supports a united Ireland—came in first place. The Assembly is a key institution in Northern Ireland's devolved government, established by the [1998 peace agreement](#) aimed at ending “the Troubles,” a 30-year sectarian conflict in which roughly 3,500 people died. The peace accord mandates power sharing in the devolved government 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 favor a united Ireland. Despite a much improved security situation since 1998, peace and stability in Northern Ireland remain fragile and of continued interest to many in Congress. (Also see CRS Report R46259, [Northern Ireland: The Peace Process, Ongoing Challenges, and U.S. Interests](#).)

Since 2007, Assembly elections have resulted in successive power-sharing governments led by the [Democratic Unionist Party \(DUP\)](#) and [Sinn Fein](#). Nevertheless, distrust persists between these parties and between the unionist and nationalist communities more broadly. The DUP strongly supports Northern Ireland remaining in the UK, whereas Sinn Fein—traditionally associated with the paramilitary Irish Republican Army (IRA)—is staunchly nationalist. Disagreements caused a nearly three-year delay in forming a devolved government after the 2017 Assembly election.

The [2022 election](#) occurred amid heightened tensions in Northern Ireland, due in part to divisions over *Brexit*—the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) in 2020. The DUP and other unionists are unhappy with the post-Brexit trade and customs arrangements for Northern Ireland (set out in a [protocol](#) to the UK-EU withdrawal agreement designed to maintain an open border on the island of Ireland and help preserve the peace process). The [DUP views the protocol](#) as dividing Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK and threatening the UK's constitutional integrity. The post-Brexit rules also have resulted in some [trade disruptions](#) between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Although Sinn Fein centered its election campaign on [everyday concerns](#), such as the rising cost of living and health care, party officials maintain that “[Brexit changes everything](#)” and have called for a referendum on Irish unification (a *border poll*).

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Election Results

For the first time in Northern Ireland’s history, [Sinn Fein won the largest number of seats](#) in the 90-member Assembly, surpassing the DUP. [Decreased support for the DUP](#) appears to be driven by dissatisfaction with the party’s leadership on Brexit and internal party divisions. The smaller, cross-community [Alliance Party made significant gains](#), attributed to voter frustration with Northern Ireland’s identity politics and frequent instability in the power-sharing institutions. Voter turnout was 63%.

Northern Ireland 2022 Election Results

(Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs))

Political Party	# of Seats	+/- Seats
Sinn Fein (SF; hard-line nationalist, left wing)	27	—
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP; hard-line unionist, conservative)	25	-3
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI; nonsectarian, centrist/liberal)	17	+9
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP; moderate unionist, center right)	9	-1
Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP; moderate nationalist, center left)	8	-4
Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV; hard-line unionist, right wing)	1	—
People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA; nonsectarian, left wing)	1	—
Independent (unionist)	2	+1

Source: [BBC News](#).

Implications

With the largest number of seats, [Sinn Fein is entitled to the position of First Minister](#), previously always held by a unionist party. Although the roles of First Minister and Deputy First Minister are equal and form a joint office that leads Northern Ireland’s Executive, a Sinn Fein First Minister would be [highly symbolic](#) given the party’s history and support for Irish unification. [Sinn Fein’s leader in Northern Ireland and presumptive First Minister, Michelle O’Neill](#), has emphasized making government work for all people in Northern Ireland. [DUP party leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson](#) has not confirmed if the DUP will fill the Deputy First Minister post alongside a Sinn Fein First Minister and [may face pressure](#) against doing so, both from within the DUP and from other unionists.

A [lengthy delay](#) in establishing a new devolved government appears likely. The [DUP asserts](#) it will not form a new power-sharing government until its concerns about the Northern Ireland protocol are resolved, but UK-EU negotiations to mitigate implementation problems with the protocol remain deadlocked. The [DUP has urged the UK government to overrule parts of the protocol](#), which would further increase UK-EU and UK-Ireland tensions. Meanwhile, the Alliance Party argues for [reforming the devolved government’s power-sharing rules](#) to promote greater stability and reflect growing support for nonsectarian parties. If a new devolved government is not formed within six months, [another election](#) may be called.

Despite Sinn Fein’s victory, a [border poll does not appear imminent](#). Any decision on a border poll in Northern Ireland rests with the UK government, which at present has [ruled out](#) holding one. Most [opinion polls](#) indicate that a majority of people in Northern Ireland [support the region remaining part of the UK](#). [Demographic](#) and [societal changes](#), however, could increase support for a united Ireland in the longer term. Sinn Fein, which also won the largest percentage of the vote in [Ireland’s general election in 2020](#), has called for an [“honest debate”](#) on a united Ireland.

U.S. and Congressional Interests

Successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress have supported the Northern Ireland peace process and have encouraged full implementation of the 1998 peace accord. Both the Biden Administration and some in Congress have stressed that Brexit must not undermine the peace process or jeopardize the open border on the island of Ireland. Following the May 5 election, the [U.S. State Department](#) urged all Northern Ireland political leaders to work together to reestablish a power-sharing government, viewing it as the best mechanism to address the region’s “critical and immediate challenges concerning the economy, health, and education.” [Some Members of Congress](#) emphasize the importance of a functioning power-sharing government to maintaining peace and stability in Northern Ireland.

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