

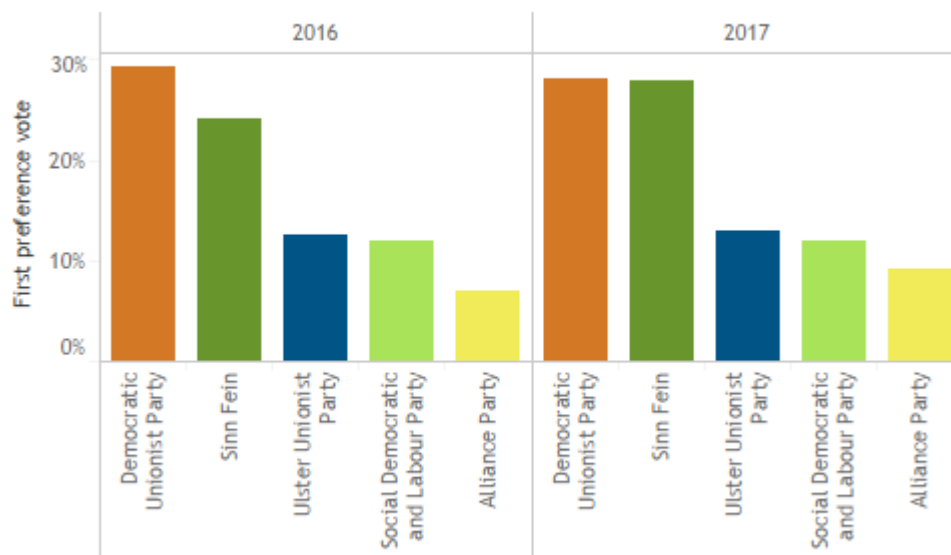
What Northern Ireland's election means for Brexit

Blog post by Associate Adviser Roberto Robles, 03 March 2017

Northern Ireland's Assembly election on 2 March has come close to delivering a political earthquake, with the nationalist Sinn Fein coming within 1,200 votes of beating the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to first place, while the Assembly could for the first time lack a unionist majority. Arguably the most consequential election since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the election will have important ramifications for both the future of devolution and Brexit's impact on Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland's system of mandatory coalition it is up to the DUP and Sinn Fein - as the largest unionist party and nationalist parties respectively - to govern jointly as they have done for the last decade. But the stakes for devolution and the future of the province are higher this time. The Renewable Heating Incentive scandal has seriously damaged the reputation of DUP First Minister Arlene Foster, and soured relations between her party and Sinn Fein, perhaps irreparably.

2017 Northern Ireland Assembly election results



Source: Northern Ireland Electoral Office

The question is not which party will govern Northern Ireland, but whether Northern Ireland will govern itself at all. Though neither of the parties favours an end to power-sharing, if an agreement between DUP and Sinn cannot be found, the Assembly will be suspended and Northern Ireland will return to direct rule from London, with the UK government directly managing the day-to-day affairs of the province.

A prolonged negotiation between the political parties - or even a return to direct rule - risks reducing Northern Ireland's influence in the Brexit negotiations and discussions, just as Theresa May prepares to trigger Article 50. Northern Ireland is arguably the part of the UK most vulnerable to a hard Brexit, and with Theresa May's announcement that she will seek the UK's exit from the single market and the customs union, some sort of border controls will almost certainly need to be implemented.

The key question is what form and intensity of border controls will be put in place. The role of the Assembly is partly to define a joint position; in the event of direct rule, Theresa May's instinct may be to call up the DUP, but this will only give a partial answer, and Sinn Fein - particularly given their good election result, which was partly due to its pro-European position - will feel entitled to a say. A lack of a government in Northern Ireland would reduce the province's input in this critical issue and make it much more difficult to ascertain its interest.