

The media election

**Coverage of the 2003 Northern
Ireland Assembly poll**

**Robin Wilson
Liz Fawcett**

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Executive summary

The 2003 assembly election campaign was to prove a remarkable media event by a number of standards.

The election itself, having twice been postponed by the UK government because of the absence of any prospect that power-sharing devolution would be renewed in its aftermath, was nevertheless called on November 26th despite the failure of a ‘choreographed’ series of statements involving the first minister and Ulster Unionist Party leader, David Trimble, the Sinn Féin president, Gerry Adams, the head of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, John de Chastelain, and the two premiers in London and Dublin, respectively Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern. There was no prospect, in such an atmosphere, that a first and deputy first minister would be consequently elected and it was inevitable that the review of the operation of the Belfast agreement, due four years after coming ‘into effect’, would move centre stage.

The context of the election thus favoured an emphasis in the campaign on ‘constitutional / political process’ issues, rather than those concerned with ‘party / assembly performance’. It was therefore unlikely that the election as it was represented in the media would focus on the performance of the parties to the former devolved executive—the UUP, SF, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Democratic Unionist Party—as against the claims of the ‘smaller’ parties—the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition and the Progressive Unionist Party—which had provided the *de facto* ‘opposition’.

This context played heavily to the pitch of the DUP, critical as this was of the performance of the UUP leader and of the trustworthiness of the prime minister. And an objective assessment of the various campaigns by the parties, *vis-à-vis* the media, demonstrates that the DUP proved the strongest competitor. Its ‘key messages’ were coherently put together and effectively presented. These two factors go some way to explaining the nature of the campaign and the election result itself.

But the media have effects on the political and public domains, as well as being the objects of political actors themselves. And this political environment does not adequately explain why the framing of the election in the media—regionally, in Dublin, London and (to an extent) internationally—should have been so preponderantly as a masculinist, communalist ‘battle’ between two ‘tribes’ and confined to four parties. Close analysis of the coverage of the 2003 assembly campaign shows a number of interrelated features, for which responsibility lies with the press and the broadcasters, where the media themselves can be subjected to scrutiny.

First, there was virtually no explanation, until the last minute, of what voters were voting *for*. The spectacle of the contest quickly took over in the coverage, with hardly any attempt to inform audiences as to the mechanics that would follow the poll—the prospect of continued suspension, and of the review, should renewed power-sharing indeed prove impossible. This was despite the fact that the collective decision of the electorate could make this process more or less fraught.

Secondly, in as far as the prospective review was addressed, it was presented in the media as a further round of *negotiations*, rather than the deliberative process the word implies. This again had real effects: it incentivised voters to support those deemed the ‘toughest negotiators’, rather than those parties that might adopt a more conciliatory line. And it was associated with a failure to present the concrete options that the review might consider to allow devolution to be re-established.

Thirdly, the election was consistently represented as a ‘gladiatorial’ contest—or, rather, two separate contests—between the leaders of the four ‘main’ parties. This was associated with a downplaying of substantive policy issues in favour of an emphasis on the appearances and the atmospherics. Indeed, it was suggested that the physical confrontation between leading UUP and DUP members outside UUP headquarters had enlivened a ‘lacklustre’ campaign.

Fourthly, there was a gross gender imbalance in the way the election was portrayed. Partly because of the focus on the (male) leaders of the four ‘main’ parties, there were vastly more references to, quotations from and interviews with male, rather than female, party representatives. While the media can not be expected to take responsibility for the parties’ failure to select more women candidates, there was little commentary during the campaign on this very problem itself—and none on the very small improvement on the number of female candidates elected in 2003 over 1998, itself a very low level indeed.

Fifthly, the stress on who would emerge as ‘top dog’ in each of the ‘unionist’ and ‘nationalist’—effectively Protestant and Catholic—camps meant the non-sectarian parties were represented as ‘a wasted vote’. It was not that these parties were unfairly treated by the media in terms of space and time devoted, but they were often presented in such a way as to delegitimise their very existence.

Sixthly, the vacuum at the heart of the coverage of the campaign was filled from the outset with endless predictions of the outcome of what were represented as the separate communalist ‘battles’. While these were genuine attempts to gauge the popular mood, they implicitly disallowed the possibility that any voter might be persuaded by the very campaign the media were contemporaneously covering. And they verged on creating self-fulfilling prophecies, by suggesting that the momentum lay behind certain parties while others would be ‘squeezed’.

Last, but by no means least, the way the election was not only called but framed by the media left little space for serious consideration of the 'bread-and-butter' issues. In so far as these were mentioned, it was mostly to convey populist claims by the parties which were rarely subjected to critical or expert analysis.

Combined, these aspects of the dominant media coverage of the election added up to a failure effectively to inform and engage the public. Such anecdotal evidence as we have is that the electorate was arguably more alienated than stimulated by the campaign, as reflected in the (by Northern Ireland standards) very low turnout.

In a democratic society, the media play a critical role as a fourth estate, 'speaking truth to power'. With honourable individual and organisational exceptions, it cannot objectively be said that the media adequately played such a role in the assembly election of 2003.

1 Introduction

1.1 Focus of the project

The media are critical to any election for two reasons. First, in an era of declining face-to-face communication, they are the principal vehicle through which the parties present themselves to the public, and thus act as a prism, refracting as well as reflecting the ‘raw material’ with which they are provided. Secondly, they have an agenda-setting function of their own, including through editorial columns, in which the principal issues at stake are defined for their audiences.

In ethnically divided societies like Northern Ireland, there are additional concerns as to whether the media, wittingly or unwittingly, are complicit in the ‘degenerate spirals of communication’ (Giddens, 1994: 245) which reproduce and even amplify communal division, as was particularly evident in ex-Yugoslavia (Thompson, 1994; Wilson, 1997).

These concerns come together in an appreciation of how any election in Northern Ireland is now, in effect, two quite separate elections. The erosion of the ‘political centre’ during decades of violent conflict and more recent polarised political manoeuvring has largely reduced what in ‘normal’ societies would be debates over the public interest (and associated policy issues) to arguments as to who best represents communal claims (Ruohomaki, 2001). This fundamentally differentiates elections in Northern Ireland—and so any analysis of any aspect of them—from elections even to the other devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales.

Nevertheless, there is a need to ensure that attention to Northern Ireland’s specificities does not crowd out more general concerns. For example, analysis of the 1997 Westminster and local-government elections in the region revealed systematic under-representation in the media of female candidates (Whitaker, 1998). And from a media-analysis perspective, there remains a question-mark over the capacity of the media in the region to handle ‘bread-and-butter’ as against ‘troubles’ issues (Fawcett, 2001), which might be thought critical at election times when the former are set out by the parties in their manifestoes.

All these sensitivities need to be taken into account in any rounded perspective on the ‘media election’ in Northern Ireland.

The emphasis in this report is on the analytical—not simply documenting and classifying media activity but elaborating a coherent narrative on the media election. *Inter alia*, it explores the dynamic relationships between the parties and the media, whether the full political spectrum was fairly represented, which issues were foregrounded and which were marginalised, to what extent the media played a critical ‘fourth estate’ role, where

they placed themselves editorially (if appropriate), and whether they assisted in the ‘education’ of the electorate as to the choices they faced.

1.2 Methodology

The methodology of the research was as follows:

- (a) content analysis of campaign and election coverage,¹ including the balance between ‘constitutional / political process’ and ‘party/assembly performance’ issues, the gender balance of party representatives cited, and the relative prominence of leaders and subaltern party figures, by
 - a. the three Belfast dailies
 - i. *Belfast Telegraph*
 - ii. *Irish News*
 - iii. *News Letter*
 - b. BBC Northern Ireland and UTV
 - i. *Insight* (UTV, Thursdays, 10.30)
 - ii. *Hearts and Minds* (BBC2 NI, Thursdays, 7.30)
 - iii. *Newsline 6.30* (weekdays, BBC1 NI)
 - iv. *UTV Live* (weekdays, UTV)
 - c. BBC Radio Ulster and RTE Radio²
 - i. *Good Morning Ulster* (GMU)
 - ii. *Morning Ireland*
 - d. the broadsheet British and Irish dailies³
 - i. *Guardian*
 - ii. *Daily Telegraph*
 - iii. *Financial Times*
 - iv. *Irish Independent*
 - v. *Irish Times*
 - vi. *The Times*

¹ This was from October 23rd 2003, as key players started to gear up for the election, until November 26th, the date of the election. To keep the project manageable, in terms of the press monitored ‘election briefs’ were excluded and parties and their representatives were only logged where they had a significant presence (ie not just a single mention in the text of an article or only a paragraph of attributed speech). This was the material that was coded for content analysis. Other material was accumulated during the campaign and after the election had taken place, and is referred to at various points in this report.

² The TV coverage surveyed was of half-hour or, at most, one-hour programmes. *GMU* and *Morning Ireland*, however, run for two and half hours and two hours respectively every day; again to keep the project manageable, one hour of each programme was surveyed daily (7.00am-8.00am for *GMU*, 8.00-9.00 for *Morning Ireland*). Because of the particular legal constraints of ‘balance’, with the broadcast media any appearance by any party or representative was logged.

³ The London *Independent* was not included in the four British broadsheets, but its analytic coverage by its Ireland editor, David McKittrick, is carried in the *Irish Independent*, also owned by the Irish newspaper magnate Tony O’Reilly.

- e. foreign and global media⁴
 - i. CNN
 - ii. *Sky News*
 - iii. *Reuters*
 - iv. *Le Monde*
 - v. *Die Welt*
 - vi. *New York Times*
 - vii. *Washington Post*
- f. selected local weeklies (one per county)⁵
 - i. *Down Recorder*
 - ii. *Derry Journal*
 - iii. *Carrickfergus Advertiser*
 - iv. *Ulster Gazette*
 - v. *Impartial Reporter*
 - vi. *Tyrone Courier*

(b) analysis of

- a. party manifestoes, websites and leaflets:
 - i. Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI)
 - ii. Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)
 - iii. Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC)
 - iv. Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)
 - v. Sinn Féin (SF)
 - vi. Progressive Unionist Party (PUP)
 - vii. Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)
 - viii. others as available
- b. coverage of campaign launches
- c. party election broadcasts (PEBs)

(c) interviews⁶ with

- a. party communications directors
 - i. Steven Alexander (media officer, APNI)
 - ii. Alex Benjamin (UUP)
 - iii. Simon Hamilton (head of policy and communications, DUP)
 - iv. Conall McDevitt (election campaign director of communications, SDLP)
 - v. Mark McLernon (director of publicity in the six counties, SF)
 - vi. Chris McCartney (NIWC)
 - vii. Andy Parks (chief electoral officer, PUP)

⁴ This was done *via* daily website inspections.

⁵ Pressure of time meant that these papers were also scanned *via* the internet.

⁶ We are very grateful to the interviewees for giving generously of their time.

- b. editors⁷
 - i. Ciaran McKeown (political editor, *News Letter*)
 - ii. Noel Doran (editor, *Irish News*)
 - iii. Edmund Curran (editor, *Belfast Telegraph*)
 - iv. Deric Henderson (Ireland editor, Press Association)
 - v. Ken Reid (political editor, UTV) & Rob Morrison (head of news and current affairs, UTV).

1.3 About the authors

Robin Wilson takes overall responsibility for the content of the report. He has been director of Democratic Dialogue since he founded it in 1995. For eight years he was editor of the magazine *Fortnight*; he has also worked as a sub-editor for both the Belfast morning newspapers. For some years he was chair of the Belfast branch of the National Union of Journalists. In 1996, he was commissioned (along with two other journalists) to conduct a content analysis of BBC Northern Ireland's news and current affairs output. In 1997, he was asked by the European Institute for the Media to generate a study of the media in Northern Ireland as part of a joint case study with Macedonia. He is a member of the course advisory panel at the University of Ulster for the MA and diploma in journalism.

The sections of the report on how the parties addressed the media—and so the public—were researched by **Liz Fawcett**, a former senior BBC journalist and former director of the postgraduate journalism courses at the University of Ulster who is now an independent consultant. She interviewed the party and media representatives, attended campaign launches and analysed the parties' manifestos, election broadcasts, web sites and other output.

Democratic Dialogue is a think tank established in 1995. One of its priority themes is democratic development and participation and it has taken a close interest in the assembly since the Belfast agreement. In particular, it has been centrally involved in the monitoring of the outworking of devolution in Northern Ireland, as part of a UK-wide project led by the Constitution Unit at University College London. This work has taken the form of quarterly monitoring reports, available at www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/leverh/monitoring.htm and including sections on the media and on political parties and elections, a chapter in an annual *State of the Nations* review, and an 'audit' of the assembly (Wilford and Wilson, 2001) as a democratic institution.

⁷ Efforts to secure an interviews with a representative of the BBC were unsuccessful; the editor of the *Belfast Telegraph* responded by e-mail to a list of questions.

2 Background: the media and the politics of Northern Ireland

2.1 The effects of the media

Any discussion of the role of the media *vis-à-vis* the political world and public opinion inevitably touches on the complex relationships between the three domains. Can parties shape how political issues are addressed by the media? Section 4 below looks at how the Northern Ireland parties tried to do so during the assembly election, and assesses their successes and failures.

Does media coverage of political developments influence how these are understood? Does it change public attitudes and perhaps voting behaviour? For example, was it the *Sun*, as the paper famously proclaimed, ‘wot won’ the 1992 general election after a virulent campaign against the then Labour leader, Neil Kinnock?

These are more complex questions and it is thus important to begin by setting this research in the context of the long tradition of media ‘effects’ studies, which have attempted to distil what impact press and broadcasting have on their audiences. And there are two immediate difficulties with such studies.

The first is that audiences can not be treated as empty vessels. Because meanings are not fixed and since they are socially constructed, particular audiences may make sense of particular media messages on the basis of particular common-sense discourses, in ways which can not be ‘read off’ from scrutiny of the media themselves (Curran, 2002: 145).

For example, a young, unemployed, male Catholic might interpret an election broadcast from a unionist party, which attacked the continuing association of SF and IRA paramilitarism, as ‘really’ indicating a refusal of political Protestants to share power with representatives of people like him. Or a bible-Protestant might interpret a reported complex statement from a republican leader, setting out the context in which IRA arms had been put ‘beyond use’, as belying a refusal to make more simple and straightforward commitments and therefore indicative of sinister intent.

The second difficulty with effects studies is to establish a relationship of causality (Gavin and Sanders, 2003: 574). How do we know that the media change attitudes, rather than, say, changing attitudes being reflected in the sales of particular newspapers? And can other causes be ruled out as determinants of particular political trends?

It is moreover important to bring in a time perspective. The intense period of media coverage—and of media attention by voters—associated with an election may not significantly shift attitudes set over a longer timespan, as the Electoral Commission’s report on the 2001 Westminster election concluded (Electoral Commission, 2001: 52).

Interestingly, the publicity director for SF, a party which made considerable gains in the election, told this project that much of what his party hoped to achieve would be based on seeds sown before the campaign harvest.

It is, however, counter-intuitive to argue that the media have no impact on political attitudes and behaviour. Few readers or viewers/listeners have independent sources of evidence to marshal against media narratives, except in particular or local arenas. And while it could be that political parties delude themselves in thinking their media campaigning worthwhile, none confines its efforts to influence potential voters to face-to-face canvassing. None will suggest that there should be an end to the 'air war' so that the 'ground war' can be the focus of inter-party competition. And none will desist from buying media advertising if they can afford it.

A more subtle way of thinking about the relationship between the media, the parties and the public would be to consider the first two as playing a *framing* role, in a complex interaction. In other words, dominant—though, as we shall see, never uncontested—conceptions of the political world are articulated *via* the media in a manner that may well constrain the challenge posed by subordinate political discourses.

Hence the nuanced approach adopted in this research, combining media analysis with interviews with key media players and political communicators. In an ideal world, it would be complemented by audience research to provide the final link in the chain.

2.2 The media and Northern Ireland

There is also a considerable literature in media studies on coverage of Northern Ireland's 'troubles', particularly by UK-based academics concerned about the adequacy of *British* media coverage. Predominant among this literature over the decades (Rolston and Miller, 1996) has been an argument that the British media have tended to rehearse official 'anti-terrorist' perspectives and to censor alternative voices. But while this claim has had validity as a critique of state authoritarianism, it makes little sense in a period when official policy has moved from 'law and order' to a focus on soliciting and then sustaining paramilitary ceasefires, particularly that of the IRA.

Indeed, a consistent critique of media coverage of Northern Ireland might be its obsession with the IRA, in 'war' and in 'peace'—a superficial focus on violence as if this were the cause of division in Northern Ireland, rather than the other way around. This has led to an associated obsession with the endless 'negotiations' comprising the 'peace process', and with the principals involved.

This has been at the expense of other political voices, less associated with partisan protagonism. It has been at the expense too of a broader perspective on the constitutional

requirements, including in a comparative context, of stable power-sharing in a divided society, on which there has been a substantial international debate in recent years (Reynolds, 2002), as Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia have all struggled to cope with intercommunal tensions following constitutional agreements concluded in the wake of civil conflicts. None of this debate has been communicated *via* the British, or Irish, media to a regional audience.

2.3 Readers and viewers

Media consumers in Northern Ireland have a wider choice of press and broadcasting outputs than anywhere else in these islands. They can purchase: all the red-top, black-top and broadsheet daily and Sunday newspapers published in London (to varying degrees editorialised for an Irish audience); the three dailies published in Dublin and Cork; and the two morning (one Catholic, one Protestant) and one evening dailies published in Belfast; and a range of local weekly papers (in some places one Catholic, one Protestant). They can listen to and view: the output of the BBC (including BBC Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle in Derry) and commercial stations transmitting from Britain; Radio Telefis Eireann (RTE) and commercial stations broadcasting from the Republic of Ireland; and, alongside BBC Northern Ireland, UTV (the ITV network station in Northern Ireland but with some all-Ireland reach), Channel 9 (a terrestrial station in Derry) and local commercial stations in Belfast and Bangor.

The potential breadth of this study was therefore almost infinite. Selection of the media analysed was based on a combination of Northern Ireland audience, regional ‘focus’ and influence.

On the first two criteria, the output of the BBC in Northern Ireland (including Radio Ulster) and UTV were recognised to be critical, as to a lesser extent was RTE. The three Northern Ireland papers were selected: the mainly Catholic *Irish News*, the mainly Protestant *News Letter* and the cross-communal (though editorially liberal-unionist) *Belfast Telegraph*.

2.4 Demographics

According to the 2001 census (NISRA, 2002), Northern Ireland has a population of nearly 1.7 million, of whom 46 per cent declare themselves to be members of one or other Protestant denomination and 40 per cent Catholic. Apart from its notorious sectarian division, it is otherwise a very monocultural region, being more than 99 per cent white.

The key circulation data for the three regional newspapers are as follows (ABC, 2003):

<i>Belfast Telegraph</i>	104,966⁸
<i>Irish News</i>	50,061
<i>News Letter</i>	30,474

The communal breakdown of these data is not available. A Northern Ireland Readership Survey formerly commissioned by the *Belfast Telegraph* has fallen into desuetude. The 1996 survey is, however, still broadly reliable (Belfast Telegraph, 1996).

This found that the *Belfast Telegraph* had somewhat more Protestant and somewhat fewer Catholic readers than would be representative of the population as a whole but that the *Irish News* and the *News Letter* were markedly skewed in sectarian terms, with only 3 per cent of readers of the former being Protestant and only 7 per cent of the latter's Catholic. The circulation manager of the *News Letter* claimed a current Catholic : Protestant readership ratio of 23:76, while the editor of the *Irish News* estimated its current readership as 10 per cent 'non-Catholic'. The editor of the *Belfast Telegraph* cited independent research for this project indicating that the paper had 297,000 readers, of which 189,000 were Protestant and 91,000 Catholic.

The fact that the *Irish News* has moved markedly ahead of the *News Letter* reflects the strength of the former's performance in recent years (as reflected in UK-wide regional press awards), the wider assertiveness in the Catholic community and the penetration in the Protestant community of the British tabloids and mid-market papers. But the *News Letter* claimed a rise of 4-5 per cent on sales during the election campaign.

There is also a significant difference in socio-economic terms between the papers' audiences. Whereas the *Belfast Telegraph* and the *News Letter* achieve more than twice as much penetration among AB as among DE readers, the penetration of the *Irish News* is highest among the latter. And while the former two papers have much higher penetration rates among those aged over 65 than those aged 15-24, the distribution for the *Irish News* is much more even. Thus the audience for the latter is not only distinctively Catholic, but also more working-class and, to an extent, younger. Given the growth of support for SF among young, working-class Catholics in recent years, this has engendered some tension *vis-à-vis* this traditionally moderate-nationalist newspaper—as the interview with SF's director of publicity for this report bore out.

On viewers and listeners, UTV's flagship *UTV Live* news programme, which runs from 6.00 pm to 6.30, claims an average nightly audience of 200,000, significantly higher than that for its BBC counterpart, *Newsline 6.30*, both of which follow their network news counterparts. (Interestingly, there was no post-devolution debate in Northern Ireland

⁸ This is a Monday-Saturday average, depressed somewhat by the fact that the Saturday paper comes out in the evening; the Monday-Friday average is currently 108,657.

paralleling that in Scotland over the ‘Scottish Six’, ie whether BBC Scotland should assume the role of ‘national’ broadcaster for the 6.00 news.) UTV’s *Insight* current-affairs programme, which goes out on Thursday nights, has, according to the station, an average of 100,000-120,000 viewers: indeed, 110,000 watched the big politicians’ debate in that slot on the Thursday before the election.

2.5 Irish and British dimensions

The British tabloids and mid-market papers were not analysed for this research, even though the former have larger circulation in the region than the two Belfast mornings, because of their weak focus on the region and influence (though the *Daily Mirror* is something of an exception in this regard).

By contrast, four British (the *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Financial Times* and *Times*) and two Irish broadsheets (the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times*) were selected, even though they have very small readerships in Northern Ireland, because of their influence with the governments in London and Dublin, who remain critical players in Northern Ireland—especially given the poor prospect of restoration of the suspended devolved institutions in the short term. Also, the Dublin media, because of the all-Ireland mental map of most of their readers, do give significant focus to ‘northern’ affairs.

2.6 The global and the local

Finally, given the internationalisation of the Northern Ireland conflict in the last decade, it was also felt worthwhile scanning a range of European, US and global media *via* the internet. Northern Ireland has been a major international news story at various points—such as the paramilitary ceasefires, the Belfast agreement—and even as recently as the failed attempt to re-establish the political institutions consequent upon the agreement in advance of the election. It was thus of interest to see if the assembly election attracted any of this broader international attention, given its potentially major implications for the viability of the agreement.

And, small though Northern Ireland is—its area is little over 14,000 sq km—it is nevertheless marked by strongly sub-regional local affiliations. This connects to the political arena in the context of a wider Irish clientelistic culture which straddles the ‘unionist’ and ‘nationalist’ blocs. So six local papers were selected for scrutiny, one in each county, with an eye to balancing sectarian orientations. The most significant of these was the *Derry Journal*, with two editions a week.

The average sales for the weeklies were (ABC, 2003):

<i>Carrickfergus Advertiser</i>	2,205
<i>Derry Journal</i>	24,720
<i>Down Recorder</i>	12,546
<i>Impartial Reporter</i>	14,276
<i>Tyrone Courier</i>	14,768
<i>Ulster Gazette</i>	10,714

3 The parties and the media

3.1 The assembly election

The Northern Ireland Assembly election was in sharp distinction from its counterparts in Wales and Scotland. Originally all three polls were slated for May 1st 2003, and that for the Parliament and the National Assembly went ahead on that date. But the Northern Ireland election was postponed—and postponed again—in the absence of consensus on how the power-sharing executive envisaged by the Belfast Agreement of 1998 could be renewed, having been suspended the previous October after revelations of an IRA spying operation at Stormont.

The Northern Ireland election was also even more clearly than in Scotland and Wales a ‘first-order’ election (Wilford and Wilson, 2003). This terminology of ‘orders’ of election was originally a recognition that elections to the European Parliament were ‘second-order’ by comparison with those to the parliaments of member states—in that, as indicated by lower turnout, voters held such elections to be of less critical import. And in, say, Germany, the elections to the sub-national *Länder* can be seen as of this character.

Where strong sub-national—or small-national—identities are at stake, however, elections for these ‘regional’ parliaments may be decoupled from the state level and just as critical (Hough and Jeffery, 2003). Indeed in Northern Ireland, given the ethnicisation of politics, *every* election has a ‘first-order’ character—irrespective of the tier of political authority nominally involved—as reflected in consistently higher turnouts than elsewhere in the UK.

The particular context in which an election was eventually called was of critical importance, and is detailed in Wilford and Wilson (forthcoming). It had been the considered view of the prime minister, Tony Blair, that it was pointless to call an election where there was no inter-party agreement on the re-establishment of a power-sharing executive afterwards. But it proved impossible in April to get the parties—in particular, the republican movement—to sign up to a joint, London-Dublin declaration, *inter alia* eschewing the detailed gamut of paramilitary activity. Hence the two postponements.

Yet a final attempt to broker such a deal, following a dozen private meetings between the Ulster Unionist leader, David Trimble, and the Sinn Féin president, Gerry Adams, floundered in a failed process of ‘choreographed’ statements on October 21st, when a report from the head of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, John de Chastelain, was unable to provide a report of sufficient ‘transparency’ with regard to a third act of putting IRA weapons ‘beyond use’ to satisfy Mr Trimble. The latter declared the process ‘on hold’ but Downing Street had already that morning

announced that the election would take place on November 26th and the government quickly confirmed that it would go ahead—despite the utter political uncertainty.

It did so even though this implied it had been wrong to postpone the election in May, in the absence of a deal, or else it had been correct then and was wrong now in proceeding to the polls. And it did so in the full knowledge that the next step after the election would not be the election of a first and deputy first minister but rather the onset of the review of the operation of the Belfast agreement, due four years after it came ‘into effect’—taken by London and Dublin as December 2003.

This had a major impact on how the media were predominantly to frame this election. As the political correspondent of UTV, Ken Reid, told this project, the ‘overriding factor’ governing the station’s treatment of the event would be the prospect of the review. UTV’s head of news and current affairs concurred. Issues like Northern Ireland’s crumbling infrastructure, health or education, were not going to be to the fore: ‘What’s going to dominate this election is the review process, unfortunately.’

But this had clear differential consequences for the contending parties and the effectiveness of their key messages. We explain below how the Democratic Unionist Party was most effective in putting its messages across but the substance of its messages chimed for many Protestants in the political context in which the election was called. The failed choreography of October 21st allowed what the party’s head of policy and communications, Simon Hamilton, described as Mr Trimble’s ‘ineptitude in negotiations’ to become ‘a key issue’ in the election, out of which ‘a lot of capital’ could be made. Similarly, ‘a very key issue’ was the denial by the IICD that Mr Blair knew more about the extent of the ‘decommissioning’ event than had been publicly revealed. The party was ‘able to use that’ too to challenge the prime minister’s trustworthiness, he said.

By contrast, this was bad news for the ‘smaller’, non-sectarian parties—principally the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition. Both of these parties want to move the region on politically to stress ‘bread-and-butter’ issues, rather than be stuck in a constitutional argument. The APNI media officer, Steven Alexander, expressed his fear to this project that Alliance would be marginalised, in media terms, in an election where the latter dominated the agenda.

If this election was to be a ‘first-order’ election, for the first time in Northern Ireland (see section 7), however, ‘apathy’ began to be seen as a genuine concern. This was not due to a mature, critical distance having been established between citizens and political parties. It was partly a sense of growing cynicism following the endless rounds of negotiations since the ‘intense public interest’—as the editor of the *Irish News* put it in his interview—associated with the promulgation of the agreement in 1998, which the first assembly election quickly followed. It was also a fear that sections of the Northern

Ireland electorate might wonder what point there was in turning out for an election out of which no devolved government would issue.

3.2 Media messages

The 2003 election campaign saw the most sophisticated attempts to date by the main Northern Ireland parties to utilise new technology to try to get their message across directly to the voter. At the same time, the parties often publicised their efforts in a bid to encourage the media to cover these innovations, thus securing valuable news coverage. In addition to a plethora of direct appeals to voters *via* new media outlets, each party also published an election manifesto. Some parties produced these in innovative formats.

This section examines the parties' use of various forms of media to appeal directly to voters through party election broadcasts, websites, posters and publications. It also compares the parties' manifestos. The analysis is limited to literature and publicity efforts which were not related to any specific constituency.⁹ It focuses on the output of the four 'main' parties—the DUP, SDLP, SF and the UUP—and three of the 'smaller' parties—the APNI, the Progressive Unionist Party and the NIWC.

All of the parties on which this analysis focuses made use of their right to one or more party election broadcasts. Each party also had a website. The DUP set up a special website for the election campaign. The other parties either adapted their existing site or added special election web pages. A few parties provided opportunities on their sites for people to sign up for regular campaign text messages, e-mails or video coverage. There were also some targeted attempts at canvassing.

Both SF and the SDLP targeted first-time voters. The SDLP sent out 10,000 copies of a DVD entitled 'Rock Your Vote'. To help ensure that this was not simply binned, recipients were given the chance to win free tickets to a Justin Timberlake concert—but they had to watch the DVD in order to find out how to enter the prize draw. SF produced a credit-card size calendar aimed at younger voters with the message 'Sometimes it takes a four-letter word to be heard ... vote.' The party also produced a special election leaflet for rural constituencies.

Every party except the APNI made some use of billboard posters. The DUP introduced a traditional touch by hiring old-fashioned advertising trailers sporting colourful cartoons. Other than their manifestos, the parties produced little election literature which was not constituency-specific. However, a few parties did include a generic element in their local

⁹ Every effort was made to obtain copies of all non-constituency specific literature and other output from the parties. In a few cases, however, copies of the relevant literature were not forthcoming. This analysis covers all literature which was made available by parties or which was available on their websites.

election literature, such as an address from the party leader. The DUP and the SDLP attempted to get away from traditional-style manifestos: the DUP issued its manifesto in the form of a magazine, while the SDLP produced a summary version of its on CD-rom.

All the parties used a key slogan which summed up the essence of their campaign strategy. Most of these catchphrases were positive and attempted to differentiate the party from its competitors. Some also implied that the other parties had failed to deliver. This latter category included the DUP with 'It's Time for a Fair Deal', the APNI with 'Alliance Works: tribal politics doesn't', the NIWC with 'Change the Face of Politics', and the PUP with a rather lengthy slogan, 'How long are you prepared to wait for benefits to our community?'. The UUP sought to differentiate itself from the DUP with its 'The Future not the Past', while the SDLP tried to persuade voters that it was particularly important to vote SDLP in this election with 'Now More Than Ever'. SF promoted a positive vision with 'Building an Ireland of Equals'.

The parties varied in the extent to which they promoted other different or related messages. The most sophisticated attempt at promoting a number of related key messages was made by the DUP. Most of these slogans were negative but they were complemented by other messages which stressed that the party had a host of policy ideas. The language used was invariably of the simple and rather cheeky style favoured by tabloids such as the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*. Both the *Sun* and the *Mirror* are widely read in Northern Ireland, and the DUP's strategy was obviously to use a style with which many unionists could easily identify.

The party highlighted its opposition to the Belfast agreement, and its determination to renegotiate it. It attempted to build on the fears of unionist voters: the party painted a nightmare scenario of a Northern Ireland executive in which 'terrorists' held sway. Further cause for alarm was injected with what the party dubbed the 'Triple Tax Threat' which it claimed was facing people in Northern Ireland. But the party also emphasised what it had to offer through the slogan 'Real Policies for a Better Northern Ireland' and a focus on the fact that it had produced '400 pages of DUP policy', as the party's deputy leader, Peter Robinson, boasted at the manifesto launch.

While most of the lesser key messages of the parties' campaigns were related to their main slogans, the SDLP and the UUP opted for eye-catching additional catchphrases not obviously linked to their main messages. The SDLP produced two election posters which attempted to persuade the public that voting for, or transferring to, the SDLP would prevent the DUP gaining power. One contained a road-sign with 'Stop the DUP'. Underneath were the messages 'Vote SDLP', followed in slightly smaller letters by 'Transfer SDLP' and, lastly, in an even smaller typeface, 'Protect the Agreement'. The other contained a picture of Ian Paisley Senior and Junior with the words 'Two Good Reasons to Vote SDLP'. Neither of these posters explained why voting for, or giving a transfer to, the SDLP would stop the DUP.

The UUP launched its campaign with the slogan ‘Simply British’. This was intended to suggest that it would preserve British culture and to appeal to those Protestants who might be questioning why devolution was preferable to direct rule. But it could be argued that the slogan simply implicitly equated life under a devolved, UUP-dominated executive with that under direct rule. It may thus have suggested that the UUP had little to offer beyond the Westminster-governed *status quo*.

Any political party should try to avoid sending out mixed or confusing messages during an election campaign. Neither the ‘Stop the DUP’ nor the ‘Simply British’ slogans were logical extensions of the main campaign slogans of the SDLP and the UUP respectively. The SDLP’s message was not self-explanatory and risked confusing voters. The UUP’s slogan risked suggesting that direct rule was actually preferable to devolution. By contrast, the DUP wove together a number of hard-hitting slogans and messages which all complemented each other; each reiterated the party’s main slogan, ‘It’s Time for a Fair Deal’.

All three unionist parties relevant to this study produced a set of ‘principles’. The DUP and the PUP appeared to adopt this strategy to help secure the votes of fundamentalist unionist voters concerned that their party might be prepared to compromise on key principles. The UUP produced a 10-point ‘Ulster Unionist Charter’, agreed to by both pro- and anti-agreement candidates, and clearly designed to try to provide a veneer of unity over a bitterly divided set of candidates.

3.3 Party presentation

Beyond the core messages, the DUP also proved the most effective in terms of the presentation of its campaign. It employed a design style which was carried through on its website, election posters and literature. The design adopted by the party was not the most aesthetically pleasing: it consisted of brash retro colours and a cheeky, cartoon style encapsulated by the presentation of the ‘It’s a Fair Deal’ slogan within a cartoon speech bubble. But the colours and style were recognisably different from the other parties, helping to differentiate the DUP in the minds of voters.

Each of the seven parties adopted particular colours and images—a ‘look’—for this campaign. The look was used on the parties’ websites, posters and literature. In some cases, the same campaign images and colours featured in the parties’ election broadcasts. Apart from the DUP, the only parties which managed to stand out from the others colour-wise were the APNI, which used yellow as its main colour, and the NIWC, which opted for Andy Warhol-style ‘pop art’ images of its candidates against a bright pink background.

The DUP's cartoon posters were the most effective of any produced by the parties. They were professional, witty and entertaining. Each belittled the UUP leader, Mr Trimble, for making too many 'concessions' to SF. One of the trio of cartoons was used on candidates' election leaflets. This showed a hapless Trimble sweeping paper notes listing the alleged concessions—'IRA in government', 'Stormont Spy Ring' etc.—under a carpet. Behind him stood the SF president, Mr Adams, with a box full of more 'concession notes', while behind him was a grinning paramilitary figure waving a grenade. The election leaflets also featured a series of images, again used as posters, which showed ordinary people saying why they were voting DUP. Every leaflet offered voters a lift if they needed transport to the polling station.

Other parties used posters to reinforce their key messages. Aside from the DUP, the NIWC was the only party which produced an innovative poster—the collection of Warhol-style images. But while these images of the candidates worked well as a whole, slightly adapted versions were also used in leaflets and posters promoting individual candidates. Unfortunately, the rather garish images—even when toned down—simply made it appear as if the party could not afford to get decent photographs of its candidates; one needed to see the collective image to appreciate the Warhol context.

The UUP opted for posters featuring key messages and two 'Simply British' images: the classic Mini car with a Union flag on the roof, and a bag of fish and chips. In addition to its anti-DUP posters, the SDLP used a billboard poster featuring its party leader and six other candidates, with the slogan 'Now More than Ever'. The candidates were all facing in slightly different directions and looked very stiff and unreal; they were reminiscent of a group of mannequins in a shop window. But this was, at least, an attempt to get away from the traditional 'group shot'.

SF, by contrast, stuck to more conventional images in its posters. One of the party's key election slogans was 'Your Winning Team', and many of its posters and newspaper advertisements featured group photographs of SF politicians. Female and younger politicians were always placed to the fore, promoting an inclusive image. The party's use of the slogan seemed designed to play on people's sporting wish to support the winning side and the desire to be part of 'the gang'.

Two parties produced posters aimed specifically at first-time voters. The UUP came up with the witty slogan 'You never forget your first time'. The APNI produced a mock fly poster in the style of an advertisement for a trendy night club. The PUP also opted to get away from conventional imagery by using a photograph of children, rather than candidates, for its posters and for most of its election leaflets. The black-and-white photograph featured children who were clearly meant to appear to be from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. But they were lined up for the photographer in a rather unnatural pose and this did not make for a compelling image.

The PUP used the same image on its website. Of the seven parties considered, it had the weakest website; its relatively thin content did not change throughout the campaign. By far the most effective was that of the DUP. It copied some of the most clever tricks of commercial websites, with plenty of appealing visuals enticing you to 'click here' to go on to another page and thus spend more time on the site. Every page of the site featured an illustrated box inviting you to 'Click here for DUP Text Messages'. The evident aim was to ensure that as many visitors as possible stayed as long as possible and ended up identifying more closely with the DUP 'brand' than they might have otherwise. The look and content of the home page were also changed regularly to add interest and encourage repeat visits.

Both the DUP and the SDLP websites made use of words and messages which only stayed up a short time before being replaced. The SDLP's website had the most sophisticated version of this technique, with words emerging and fading in rapid succession on the strap along the top of its home page. This enabled policy issues to be addressed in no more than a few key words; thus, we were told that the party was for 'education, health, roads' and against 'water charges'. The DUP was even less specific in its use of the same technique, using phrases such as 'Real Policies for a Better Northern Ireland' and 'Energetic, Positive, Imaginative Ideas'. SF also produced an attractive and informative series of election web pages. These three parties all succeeded in making their websites or web pages appear to have plenty happening, with a wide choice of links. By contrast, the UUP website had a rather impersonal feel. A lone picture of Mr Trimble on the home page merely enhanced the public image of isolation within his warring party.

While the PUP's website was the least sophisticated of those analysed, the party made the most effective use of its allotted five-minute party election broadcast (PEB). While most parties tried to be imaginative in their use of their PEB slot(s), only the PUP produced an innovative broadcast of reasonably high technical quality which was coherent and had an impact.

This began with music based on a ticking clock, which continued underneath the voiceover by the party's leader, David Ervine. The video showed Mr Ervine walking through and surveying scenes of grim urban desolation. His voiceover, which was flashed up as superimposed text, was scripted as separate short sentences voiced to fit in with the beat of the music. The last few sentences were not voiced but were simply shown as superimposed text for additional impact: 'This is a can-do manifesto. But the clock is ticking. It's time to act now.'

The overall message was that neither peace nor direct rule had brought any benefits for what Mr Ervine described as 'my community'. The suggestion was that the PUP could make a difference if its assembly members were re-elected. The video was very well-directed and edited. Technically, it was marred only by the use of very basic superimposed text. It had the appeal of a pop video and yet would not have offended

those who were not pop fans. While some of the other PEBs made five minutes feel like a very long time, the PUP's broadcast really engaged the viewer.

None of the other parties' PEBs matched it in technical quality. This is perhaps surprising as the PEB does offer parties an unrivalled opportunity to get their message across to a large audience in an effective way. The next most successful, in production terms, was the SDLP's broadcast. This featured ordinary (mostly working-class and lower middle-class) people expressing their wishes for the future. Only one politician made a brief appearance at the end—the party's leader, Mark Durkan, who said: 'All these hopes and more can be fulfilled. Together we can make it happen. Now more than ever.' A background soundtrack of Irish-style, middle-of-the-road music was played throughout.

The SF broadcast also featured Irish music—this time of the more traditional variety. Presumably in the belief that a politician who speaks is a turn-off, no established politicians said anything in this video. Instead, viewers were presented with a series of split-screen images showing the party's politicians in action and other images with which republican voters might identify, such as murals. A softly-spoken woman with a southern Irish accent—a new candidate for the party, Caitriona Ruane, who was to succeed in South Down—provided the voiceover. This informed viewers that 'growing numbers are voting for Sinn Féin north and south'. Many of the images showed group shots of smiling party politicians, clearly enjoying themselves and getting on well together. This appeared to be designed to underline SF's 'your winning team' campaign theme. Compared with the PUP and SDLP videos, however, this broadcast had a very bland feel.

The DUP and the UUP produced more than one PEB. These varied in technical quality and all featured politicians doing pieces to camera. The best was the second of the DUP's broadcasts. This featured Peter Robinson and continued the 'nightmare scenario' theme. Viewers were treated to mock newspaper headlines such as 'Twelfth parades banned' and 'Irish compulsory in all schools'. Mr Robinson attacked the UUP for the 'concessions' it had allegedly made to republicans. The video worked because it produced a clear and coherent message. Other broadcasts produced by both parties suffered because they attempted to do too much within a very short time.

3.4 Personalities or policies?

While a few PEBs attempted to inform the viewer about the party's policies, none was particularly successful: information about policy does not sit easily within a five-minute slot. Indeed, information about policy did not seem to be the main priority for any of the seven parties analysed during this campaign. Instead, the focus was on getting across simple, core messages, presenting a compelling image, and promoting one or more key personalities.

This pattern was undoubtedly, in part, simply a reflection of the broader trend among political parties in many western countries to focus on personalities and image, at the expense of information on policies. A key factor—not unique to Northern Ireland—was the fact that, leaving aside constitutional issues, the parties’ policies on many issues were very similar. Moreover, our interviews with party communications staff suggested that the parties feel local, constituency-based issues—as opposed to broad party policy—are often what matters most to voters. Thus, at a regional level, core messages, image and personalities were the main means by which the parties could differentiate themselves from each other.

In Britain, the main parties have followed the United States in recent elections by conducting ‘presidential-style’ campaigns which focus on the party leader. The SDLP and the UUP both adopted this style for their campaigns. Both leaders featured heavily on their party’s website. Both provided photo-opportunities which promoted Mr Durkan and Mr Trimble respectively.

In contrast, the DUP and SF opted for promoting a ‘team’ image. The DUP’s main photo image, used on its website and on its campaign ‘battle bus’, featured the party’s five MPs. SF used a number of group shots in its posters and on its website. The party did make use of its party leader, however: Mr Adams featured on every candidate’s election leaflet and on the party’s website.

3.5 The manifestos

While the focus of the parties’ campaigns may have been on appealing images and core messages, only one of the seven could stand accused of failing to make available much information on its policies. While all the others provided a reasonable amount of policy detail in their manifestos and on their websites, the UUP produced a thin manifesto and provided little more on policy on its website. The PUP produced an even slimmer manifesto, although it likewise made available more policy information on its website.

The UUP’s manifesto ran to a mere nine pages and represented a triumph of style over substance. It was very attractively presented and made good use of illustrations. Rather than using conventional policy headings, such as ‘health’ or ‘education’, policies were presented under more thematic titles such as ‘A healthy society’ and ‘A prosperous society’. Each section was just a page long and contained a short policy rationale, followed by bullet-point proposals. This made it easy to read and coherent. But most of the proposals were vague or simply described things which were going to happen anyway. Further illumination on the UUP’s policies was not easily available on the party’s website. Policy papers were tucked away under a link entitled ‘latest news’. None of these related to ‘bread-and-butter’ issues and there was no ‘search’ facility on the website to help track down policy documents on specific issues.

The DUP also prioritised style over substance in the presentation of its manifesto, which took the form of a colourful, glossy magazine. While its document ran to 30 pages, much of this consisted of illustrations. Half the document was negative in content, promoting the ‘nightmare scenario’ theme and attacking the government and other parties. Just a third dealt with policies on bread-and-butter issues. The manifesto did contain many more specific proposals than the UUP’s. Yet, despite the fact that a whole page was taken up with a picture of a woman and a baby, the document failed to mention childcare.

The DUP’s manifesto and its website did publicise the existence of no less than 14 attractively presented policy documents, focusing on particular policy areas. These were downloadable from the website or could be ordered. They added considerably more substance to the bullet points in the manifesto. The ‘Senior Citizens Charter’, for example, dealt exclusively with the care of, and support for, older people.

Of the two main nationalist parties, the SDLP produced the more attractively presented and well-written manifesto. SF’s manifesto was 90 pages long, but much of this was taken up with images. The SDLP produced a 30-page document, mostly text. In terms of design and layout, SF’s manifesto did not differentiate sufficiently between party achievements, policy rationale and bullet-point proposals. This made it difficult to read quickly and to pick out key policy proposals. By contrast, the SDLP’s document separated out these elements, giving the manifesto a more coherent, neater feel.

SF’s document did benefit from the use of larger print, while the typeface used in the SDLP’s document was much smaller and would have been rather hard to read for some. But the party did produce large-print and audio-tape versions, as well as summary versions in Cantonese, Irish and Urdu. SF produced an Irish and an audio-tape version of its document. SF’s manifesto had one major omission in terms of policy: it failed to deal with any issues directly related to the care of the elderly.

Of the smaller parties, the PUP produced the slimmest manifesto—a mere eight pages. Unlike the DUP’s, this document did not tell voters how they could obtain further information on PUP policies. The APNI document ran to 24 pages and contained no illustrations, apart from an illustrative ‘strap’ at the top of each page. Like the SDLP’s, it made use of bold type to enable the reader to skim the content and find proposals on particular issues with ease. The NIWC manifesto was longer—at 42 pages with no illustrations. The party also produced a glossy, colourful and attractive summary.

Most of the manifestos had rather surprising omissions, two of which have already been mentioned. The DUP’s manifesto was silent on another issue on which the party did have a very clear policy—the minimum wage. Its policy document on ‘Business and the Economy’ expressed opposition to the government’s provisional commitment to an

increased minimum wage of £4.85 by October 2004,¹⁰ yet, no mention of this was made in the manifesto. Those other parties which mentioned the minimum wage all supported an enhancement, in various ways, of the current proposals.

One issue on which a number of parties were silent in their manifestos was the private finance initiative (PFI), also referred to as public private partnerships (PPPs).¹¹ Before the restoration of direct rule, the Northern Ireland executive paved the way for a considerable increase in the use of PFI to finance capital investment. It is clear that the government now envisages it as one of the main means by which capital schemes can be financed in Northern Ireland: contracts worth almost £500 million have been awarded or have gone out to tender, and contracts worth just over £1 billion are in the pipeline.¹² PFI forms a major element of the government's Strategic Investment Programme for Northern Ireland, a programme which is designed to make major infrastructural improvements by 2007-8. The government intends that £725 million of the approximate £2 billion cost of this programme will be met through PFI schemes.¹³

PFI projects have attracted considerable controversy in Britain. Critics say that they boost private sector-profits at the expense of the taxpayer and often represent poor value for money. But the SDLP's leader and former finance minister, Mr Durkan, appears to approve. The government's Northern Ireland website 'PPP News' quotes him as telling the assembly:

The debate today has highlighted the many demands that are being placed on our public services, and clearly we will not be able to achieve all that we desire without significant contributions from the private sector. PPP/PFI schemes provide a realistic and achievable way of doing this.¹⁴

Given the SDLP leader's enthusiasm for PFI, one might have imagined support would have featured in the party's manifesto. But it did not, and nor did it merit a mention in the manifestos of the DUP, UUP or the APNI. The topic did feature, however, in one of the DUP's policy documents. Its 'Triple Tax Threat' paper voiced the party's support for PFI. Those parties which did mention PFI in their manifestos—SF, the PUP and the NIWC—all expressed their opposition to this method of securing finance.

SF said that its ministers had argued unsuccessfully in the executive that all options for public finance be fully considered. But the manifesto neglected to point out that its two

¹⁰ The rate of £4.85 would apply to workers aged 22 and above only.

¹¹ Strictly speaking, a PPP may consist of some other contractual framework than that used for a PFI. In practice in Northern Ireland, however, the two have been treated as synonymous.

¹² information from 'PPP News', Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, at www.pfi-ni.gov.uk

¹³ news release, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 15th January, 2003

¹⁴ statement of June 12th 2000 to the Northern Ireland Assembly, quoted by 'PPP News'

ministers, responsible for education and health, actually implemented PFI schemes. Announcing the first PFI contract for a Catholic maintained school in Northern Ireland, St Genevieve's in west Belfast, in September 2000, Mr McGuinness had described PFI as 'an innovative procurement method' and went on:

It is clear that PFI does offer real potential for value for money solutions to the pressing capital investment needs of our schools generally. My Department will, over the coming months, be consulting with schools authorities and other interested bodies, on its plans for the extended future use of PFI, in conjunction with conventional capital new starts.¹⁵

With the exception of the DUP, all the manifestos focused largely or exclusively on policies related to bread-and-butter issues, such as health and education, rather than on constitutional or 'sectarian' issues such as the Belfast agreement, demilitarisation or policing reform.

At the parties' manifesto launches, however, the questions from journalists focused almost exclusively on constitutional issues, the particular party's perceived campaign weaknesses or tactical questions such as vote management. There were very few questions on the bread-and-butter issues which formed such a major part of the manifesto documents.

3.6 The parties and the media

There is no doubt that, of the seven parties analysed, the DUP ran the most effective campaign, in terms of publications and use of other media forms to appeal directly to voters. It would require further research to establish to what extent this contributed to the DUP's success in the election, but it seems unlikely that it was not an important factor. The DUP presented an appealing and coherent image, clearly differentiated from that of the other parties. Its messages all reinforced its core campaign slogan, 'It's Time for a Fair Deal'. Its literature, posters and website all provided entertainment as well as information. The success of the party's strategy of relentless attack on Mr Trimble and the agreement demonstrates that negative campaigning does not necessarily alienate voters.

At the same time, the many negative messages and themes were complemented by what appeared to be a very solid and plentiful base of positive policy ideas. While the manifesto itself focused on negative messages and image-led content, readers were directed to a large number of more specific policy documents, attractively and clearly

¹⁵ Department of Education news release, 'A "first" for St Genevieve's High School, Belfast', September 14th 2000

presented. These documents were also highlighted on the party's election website. The website was skilfully designed and employed many of the techniques of commercial websites to encourage visitors to identify as strongly as possible with the DUP 'brand'.

This analysis has highlighted various omissions in terms of policy issues within the manifestos of a number of parties. Obviously, the parties are under no obligation to address particular issues in this way. Here the media can play a vital role in scrutinising the content of manifestos. Yet, as noted above, those journalists who attended the launches displayed very little interest in policies on bread-and-butter issues.

4 Nature of the coverage

4.1 How much?

In terms of the press, the following articles were registered in the period covered:

Title	Articles	Average
Regional dailies		
<i>Belfast Telegraph</i>	128	4.3
<i>Irish News</i>	172	5.7
<i>News Letter</i>	242	8.1
Irish broadsheets		
<i>Irish Independent</i>	72	2.4
<i>Irish Times</i>	96	3.2
British broadsheets		
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	9	0.3
<i>Financial Times</i>	9	0.3
<i>Guardian</i>	11	0.4
<i>Times</i>	10	0.3

Clearly there was a gradation of interest, as might be expected, with the regional dailies providing most extensive coverage, followed by the Dublin broadsheets and finally their counterparts in London. The *News Letter* stands out by the sheer extensiveness of its commitment, driven—as our interview with him indicated—by the paper’s enthusiastic political editor, Ciaran McKeown, with the support of the recently appointed editor of the paper.

In terms of broadcasting, *Newsline 6.30* and *UTV Live* registered 32 and 35 items respectively during the period, which comprised 26 working days—in other words, more than one item per evening. And, just monitoring one hour each of *Good Morning Ulster* (which lasts for two and a half) and *Morning Ireland* (which lasts for two) each weekday caught 19 and 11 items respectively.

As to current affairs television, it is true that BBC Northern Ireland only devoted one edition of the weekly *Spotlight* to the election, while UTV gave over just two of the four slots for *Insight*. BBC Northern Ireland did, however, turn over all of its weekly *Hearts and Minds* programme for the duration.

Overall, while editorial enthusiasm for the election varied, the regional coverage can hardly be described as low-level, while attention in Dublin was significant. This is particularly so given that the averages above conceal the increase as the campaign

progressed and the avalanche of press and broadcast reportage of the results themselves is not included.¹⁶

Interest from the international media was virtually non-existent: only 12 pieces were monitored in the global press and broadcast media surveyed. Northern Ireland is no longer a world story—though the results of the election, as these emerged, did raise international media attention and concern (see below).

The local weeklies also showed relatively little interest in the campaign, with the exception of the *Derry Journal*, which gave the election massive attention. Derry tends to have a self-image as a place apart, however, and coverage of the local contest was supplemented by extensive material taken from the Press Association of what the paper called ‘national’ election news.

While interest in the election in Britain was low-key, the BBC bravely decided to take its major current-affairs programme *Question Time* to Omagh, Co Tyrone, during the campaign. The four ‘main’ parties focus (see below) dovetailed with the programme’s usual format of four politicians facing a studio audience.

There was no evidence, however, that any of the panel appreciated that they should adapt their answers to a UK-wide audience, or even that Northern Ireland’s ‘normal’ antagonistic political style and self-obsession should be tempered. Text messages from viewers in Britain were on the whole very much less than complimentary, with comments like ‘The whole panel should grow up’ and ‘The world is a bigger planet than Northern Ireland’.¹⁷

4.2 How prominent?

While the newspapers and the broadcasters gave over substantial column-centimetres and airtime to the election, it was clear that they did not see it, until the election day approached, as occupying a central position in the minds of their audiences. It was very rare for the story to be the lead. On *Newsline* 6.30, it occupied the lead just twice, and just once on *UTV Live*.

The following table shows how the story was usually well buried in the papers too. Here the average point in the pagination at which an election story appeared is presented, so the lower the figure the more prominent the article. (In fairness to the *News Letter*, its figure is inflated by the fact that it is a bulky tabloid, and the two-to-three page

¹⁶ This is not included in the codification because of how it would distort the results.

¹⁷ See the Slugger O’Toole weblog, at www.sluggerotoole.com/home/archives/002491.asp.

constituency profiles were not unreasonably carried well inside. The *Irish News* is between the size of a tabloid and a broadsheet.)

Title	Average page position
Regional dailies	
<i>Belfast Telegraph</i>	6.4
<i>Irish News</i>	8.8
<i>News Letter</i>	13.8
Irish broadsheets	
<i>Irish Independent</i>	10.9
<i>Irish Times</i>	8.9
British broadsheets	
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	10.9
<i>Financial Times</i>	5.5
<i>Guardian</i>	12.9
<i>Times</i>	5.0

Current-affairs coverage on TV showed the same pattern. For example, while *Hearts and Minds* is repeated in a late-night BBC1 slot, its prime-time location (at 7.30pm) is on BBC2. Here BBC Scotland shows an interesting contrast, especially as the Scottish Parliament has broadly similar powers of primary legislation to those of the Northern Ireland Assembly¹⁸ and has been associated with similarly lukewarm public commitment (Curtice, 2003). In what BBC Scotland’s deputy head of news and current affairs, Val Atkinson, described as ‘a bold and brave decision’, the station decided to run five 35-minute election programmes at 7.00 on BBC1, in advance of the election to the parliament, each comprising an interview with one of the party leaders (dividing one programme into two for the leaders of the Scottish Socialists and the Greens).¹⁹

4.3 Party leaders and subaltern figures

The focus of the press and broadcast coverage was heavily leader-oriented. TV debates were set up preferably to embrace the four ‘main’ party leaders. One-to-one interviews had the same style. Indeed, the fact that the DUP was unwilling to put its leader, Mr Paisley, up for such set pieces became an issue in itself, with interviewers persistently claiming that the party was ‘hiding’ its ageing and fundamentalist leader from the audience.

¹⁸ Policing is devolved in Scotland but not yet in Northern Ireland; social security is theoretically devolved in Northern Ireland but not in Scotland.

¹⁹ *Holyrood*, March 11th 2003

Here is how the balance between references to / quotations from leaders and subalterns showed up in the main categories of media:²⁰

Media	Leader	Subaltern
Local weeklies	12	58
Regional dailies	165	247
Regional broadcasters (news)	68	58
Regional broadcasters (TV current affairs)	14	7
Dublin broadsheets	95	96
London broadsheets	29	17
International media	11	2

This table shows clearly that the further away from the local to the global the more ‘presidentially’ the election was represented to be. Overall, however, the predominance of the *Führerprinzip* is strong. Allied to the fact that the focus was on the four ‘main’ parties, that their leaders were all male, and that the contest was being set up as a gladiatorial confrontation between two pairs of them (see succeeding sections), this had a significant effect on the framing of the election.

²⁰ Constituency profiles are excluded from this analysis, since by definition media are obliged to list all participants.

5 Representing the spectrum?

5.1 Gender-bending

In an election focusing, as so typically in Northern Ireland, on the ‘battle’ over ‘constitutional’ issues, women, and their representation, once more took a back seat. For instance, the *News Letter* was keen to promote its (well-researched) constituency profiles, advertising them with a cartoon entitled ‘The candidates chasing your vote: an in-depth look at the issues affecting each of the 18 battle grounds’.²¹ Eight political figures were presented as caricatures; all eight were male.

There was virtually no media comment on the gross gender imbalance among the parties. There was a fine feature by the chief reporter of the *Irish News*, placing the gender deficit in an international context and drawing on the expertise of Carmel Roulston, a professor of politics at the University of Ulster.²² Similarly, a piece by the political correspondent of the *Irish Independent* highlighted that ‘in the macho world of Northern politics’ only 49 out of 256 candidates were female.²³ Yet in her *News Letter* column Suzanne Breen not unreasonably bemoaned both the ‘pitifully few’ women on the ballot papers and the dearth of debate about it.²⁴

There was indeed a gross disparity in gender representation in the media coverage. The references to / quotations from party representatives monitored broke down as shown in the table below.²⁵ These are desperately stark figures.

Media	Male	Female	Ratio m:f
Local weeklies	61	14	4.36:1
Regional dailies	363	59	6.15:1
Regional broadcasters (news)	117	10	11.7:1
Regional broadcasters (TV current affairs)	21	1	21:1
Dublin broadsheets	169	23	7.35:1
London broadsheets	45	1	45:1
International media	12	1	12:1

Just as seriously, any self-reflection about the masculinist language of electoral journalism was also absent. Again and again, as this report indicates elsewhere, the metaphor was the boxing ring or the battlefield. Some of the reportage seemed closer to

²¹ *News Letter*, November 1st 2003

²² Sharon O’Neill, ‘Politics still male domain in the north’, *Irish News*, November 22nd 2003

²³ Alison O’Connor, ‘Women making small gains on political stage’, *Irish Independent*, November 15th 2003

²⁴ Suzanne Breen, ‘More women must enter the political arena’, *News Letter*, November 20th 2003

²⁵ Constituency profile pieces are again excluded for the same reason as above.

the disposition of the ringside spectator than the critical commentator. Indeed, one pre-poll piece on UTV was actually introduced in terms of ‘the main parties ... swapping late punches’, cueing comment from the station’s political editor, who was described as having ‘been ringside’.²⁶ Similarly, a *Belfast Telegraph* headline ran ‘Gloves off for last round of election battle’.²⁷

There appeared also to be no comprehension that what the political-correspondent fans might enjoy watching as blood sport might alienate many ordinary viewers. This was particularly striking in the coverage of what became known as ‘the fuss at the bus’ (after the ‘brawl in the hall’ between assembly members at Stormont in November 2001).

This followed the arrival of the DUP ‘battle bus’, media in tow, at the UUP’s east Belfast headquarters, where a prolonged shouting match and exchange of insults ensued between the UUP leader, Mr Trimble, the DUP deputy leader, Mr Robinson, and various supporters on either side. If democracy at its best is about dialogue and deliberation—the substitution of ‘jaw jaw’ for ‘war war’—this was clearly its most ugly aspect.

Yet the episode was almost universally welcomed among the reporters covering the election. On RTE Radio that lunchtime, Brendan Wright said it had ignited a ‘lacklustre’ campaign. Asked if the DUP leader, Mr Paisley, had won the ‘confrontation’ on the street and if he would win it at the ballot box, Mr Wright enthused: ‘The battle for unionist top dog is game on.’²⁸

It was the same story that evening on *UTV Live*. The station’s political correspondent, Mr Reid, said a ‘low-key campaign’ had been ‘brought to life’. And he concluded: ‘It made things interesting. There was a bit of spark about it.’ Asked what the voters would make of it, however, he confessed he didn’t know.²⁹

Mark Devenport was similarly enlivened at the BBC. The *Newsline 6.30* presenter Noel Thompson began the programme with: ‘Well, they were saying it was a dull election campaign, but not any more ... The DUP battle bus went cruising for trouble this morning.’ Mr Devenport thought it would ‘probably galvanise what has been a rather formulaic campaign’. This was ‘real drama’, he declared, with ‘both sides claiming victory’—he allocated it, ‘on points’, to the UUP. It had ‘certainly invigorated things’.³⁰ Dan Keenan of the *Irish Times* put it in almost biblical terms. He wrote: ‘For several minutes the immovable rock of Ulster Unionist anger clashed with the irresistible force

²⁶ *UTV Live*, November 21st 2003

²⁷ *Belfast Telegraph*, November 24th 2003

²⁸ *News at One*, RTE, November 18th 2003

²⁹ *UTV Live*, November 18th 2003

³⁰ *Newsline 6.30*, BBC NI, November 18th 2003

of DUP righteousness, generating a flicker of pulse in the near-cadaver of this campaign.’³¹

But the *Belfast Telegraph* took a dim view of it all. It suggested that by their votes electors could ‘show just what they think of such puerile stunts’, but it feared that public respect for politics, ‘already low’ would take ‘another battering’.³²

Eighteen of the successful candidates were female—a modest gain on the outgoing 15 female MLAs but still only a tally of one in six. In none of the monitored results coverage was this sustained gender deficit highlighted. This was despite the fact that the Scottish Parliament and Welsh National Assembly elections in May achieved significant representation for women. Nor, moreover, was there any monitored coverage of the case made in the ‘Women’s Manifesto’ (see below) for use of the legislation allowing for women-only shortlists.

5.2 The ‘smaller’ parties

The coverage of the election was characterised by a clear distinction between what were deemed the ‘main’ and the ‘smaller’ parties, and between the latter and the ‘minor’ parties. This is the language used by the BBC in its guidance, for the 2001 Westminster election³³ as for the 2003 assembly poll,³⁴ but it is clear that the media surveyed generally operated with similar criteria, explicit or implicit (though only the broadcasters are covered by ‘balance’ requirements).

The BBC assembly election guidelines began (emphasis in original): ‘Daily News magazine programmes must **achieve an appropriate and fair balance** in coverage of the 4 main parties in **the course of each week** of the campaign, that is, The [*sic*] Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP, the DUP and Sinn Fein.’ And they insisted: ‘Every edition of a [*sic*] multi-item programmes which cover the campaign e.g. Newslines 18.30-19.00 slot, should refer in at least one item to each of the main parties.’

The ‘smaller’ parties were defined as having at the time of dissolution of the assembly more than one member and standing in at least three of the 18 constituencies in the election. The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, the Progressive Unionist Party, the Northern Ireland Unionist Party and the United Unionist Assembly Party fulfilled the first of these criteria but only the first three the second.³⁵ The guidelines said the *minimum* coverage for these parties should embrace

³¹ Dan Keenan, ‘Paisley takes fight to Trimble’, *Irish Times*, November 19th 2003

³² ‘Voters will not be impressed by row’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 19th 2003

³³ See http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/producer_guides/pdf/section6a.pdf.

³⁴ See http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/producer_guides/pdf/ni_elections.pdf.

³⁵ The NIUP ran two candidates and the UUAP one.

their manifesto launch on *Newsline 6.30* and (on Radio Ulster) *Evening Extra*, as well as explanation and analysis of the policies of each ‘in at least one separate item during the campaign’ on all daily news and current-affairs programmes.

‘Minor’ parties did not have to have achieved prior electoral success but did have to be standing in at least three constituencies to be attributed this status—implying that they be ‘featured at least once in the course of the campaign in the main daily news programmes’. ‘Independent’ candidates with a ‘significant track record’ should have the same status in coverage of their constituency.

In constituency reports, if any candidate were to take part, the guidelines specified that candidates from each of the ‘main’ parties should be offered a slot. It was ‘right to make some distinction in the weight of the contribution between these candidates and others’ but ‘full-length’ reports should list all candidates standing.

This gradation was introduced from the outset of the campaign. On BBC2 Northern Ireland’s *Hearts and Minds* two days after the announcement of the election, the presenter, Mr Thompson, concluded by saying the programme would interview the party leaders—‘and, of course, the smaller parties will be here too’.³⁶

This in itself is unobjectionable in the abstract. And in the sweep of the coverage overall, the degree of attention to the ‘smaller’ parties did not appear to be unreasonably small. On *Newsline 6.30*, for example, the following significant references were logged (outside of constituency profiles), reflecting the distinction into the ‘main’/‘smaller’/‘minor’ categories:

Party	References
DUP	13
UUP	12
SDLP	12
SF	11
APNI	3
NIWC	3
PUP	2
NIUP	1
UKUP	1
Workers’ Party	1
Conservative Party	1

But the four ‘main’ parties in Northern Ireland just happen also to be the main *communalist* parties, whereas the principal non-sectarian parties—the APNI and the

³⁶ *Hearts and Minds*, BBC2 NI, October 23rd 2003

NIWC—fall into the ‘smaller’ category. And this became much more problematic with the casting of the election by a wide range of media as a ‘battle’ within ‘unionism’ and another ‘battle’ within ‘nationalism’ (on which more below). A much-talked-up ‘squeeze’ on the smaller parties thus verged on negative editorialising at their expense and a self-justifying prophesy.

The first *Inside Politics* on BBC Radio Ulster at the start of the campaign³⁷ showed that the issue was not exclusion of representation of the ‘smaller’ parties *per se*. The programme was devoted to interviews with the leaders of the three smaller pro-agreement parties: the APNI, NIWC and PUP. But BBC Northern Ireland’s political editor put it to the leader of the PUP, David Ervine, that a vote for him would be ‘a wasted vote’, given that the election would be about whether Mr Trimble or Mr Paisley would be the post-agreement leader of unionism.

When Paul Clark interviewed the APNI leader, David Ford, on UTV it was the same contention. Wasn’t it ‘a wasted vote’ to vote Alliance?³⁸ As Mr Ford himself pointed out, under PR-STV, unlike first past the post, no vote is ‘wasted’ because of subsequent transfers—indeed, transfers from candidates eliminated from the count are transferred at their full value.

When Mr Thompson interviewed the NIWC leader, Monica McWilliams, on *Hearts and Minds*, he adopted a variant of this, based on the perceived power politics of the endless Northern Ireland negotiations. He put it to Prof McWilliams: ‘Even the two governments excluded you, and others of course, from the recent round of negotiations which led to the failed choreography. So your voice isn’t being heard at that level, is it? So why is a vote for you important?’

The treatment of the ‘smaller’ parties was also rendered more problematic by the downplaying of ‘bread-and-butter’ in favour of constitutional and political-process issues in the campaign (see below). As noted above, the former played much more to their electoral pitch than the latter. Thus, for example, the launch of the largest of the ‘smaller’ parties, Alliance, was reported by the *Irish Times* under the headline ‘Alliance says bread and butter issues must be addressed’.³⁹

5.3 Arguments over ‘balance’

There were, however, arguments over balance and the BBC. SF complained about being left out of a *Newsline 6.30* report on the election because the programme had also

³⁷ *Inside Politics*, BBC Radio Ulster, October 25th 2003

³⁸ *UTV Live*, November 18th 2003

³⁹ Carl O’Brien, ‘Alliance says bread and butter issues must be addressed’, *Irish Times*, November 15th 2003

included coverage of the party's 'chief negotiator', Martin McGuinness, at the Bloody Sunday tribunal. Conversely, the Socialist Party candidate in South Belfast, Jim Barbour, complained that the BBC cancelled an interview with him in his capacity as a local leader of the Fire Brigades Union because of his candidacy.⁴⁰ SF took its case to the court, but without success.⁴¹

The UK Unionist Party leader, Robert McCartney, was also unsuccessful in his challenge to the BBC. This time it was over his party's classification as 'minor' rather than 'smaller' (see above).⁴² But it was perhaps of note that the day after the judgment Mr McCartney was given a four-minute interview on *Hearts and Minds*⁴³ and a five-minute slot on *Good Morning Ulster* the day after that.⁴⁴

5.4 The influence of NGOs

A number of non-governmental organisations representing strands of civil society tried during the campaign to have 'their' concerns placed on the agenda. Broadly, this was a struggle to ensure that 'civic' concerns were not excluded by the focus on the 'ethnic' confrontation. This related to the discussion below, therefore, of 'bread-and-butter' issues.

The most sophisticated effort in this regard was made by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, the umbrella body for voluntary organisations in the region. Its second annual 'Policy Manifesto' (a revised version of one produced in anticipation of the original timescale of May 2003 for the assembly election) set out in detail proposals arising from discussions among its affiliates across the social-policy domain. It lobbied the parties, including *via* their conferences, to support its plans. It said (NICVA, 2003: 6) its vision was 'of a society where all citizens are treated as equals, where sectarianism and discrimination are not tolerated, and where respect for human rights is regarded as the norm'. The manifesto was favourably received by the parties at a meeting with party representatives to discuss it, covered by the *Irish News*.⁴⁵

In its own journal, *Scope*, NICVA editorialised that the turnout could be very low as many were 'demoralised by the experience of devolution, confused about what went wrong and, most of all, unclear how their vote can possibly achieve anything'. It suggested the Policy Manifesto could 'inject a real sense of purpose into the election campaign by raising a whole raft of issues that affect ordinary people' and concluded:

⁴⁰ Chris Thornton, 'Row over election broadcast', *Belfast Telegraph*, November 6th 2003

⁴¹ 'SF fails to win more air-time', *Irish Times*, November 7th 2003

⁴² 'BBC—2, political parties—0', *News Letter*, November 20th 2003

⁴³ *Hearts and Minds*, BBC2 NI, November 20th 2003

⁴⁴ *Good Morning Ulster*, BBC Radio Ulster, November 21st 2003

⁴⁵ Darran McCann, 'All parties back NICVA manifesto', *Irish News*, November 15th 2003

‘The fact that half a million adults in Northern Ireland are living in poverty, and more than one third of children, is as real and important an issue as General de Chastelain’s [weapons] inventory.’⁴⁶

Disability Action joined the fray with its ‘Polls Apart’ initiative. In addition to generating a manifesto on issues of concern to people with disabilities, such as employment, health, housing and transport—it launched a survey of potential disabled voters as to whether their polling station had wheelchair access. The *Belfast Telegraph* ran the story.⁴⁷

The trade unions were also concerned to have their voice heard. The Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions published a more modest ‘charter’ covering economic and social issues, which secured the support of ten parties and a range of independents. The notable absentee from the list of party supporters was the DUP.⁴⁸

The unions also pressed alongside business representatives for a focus on ‘bread-and-butter’ issues. The business section of the *Belfast Telegraph* led with the call, quoting the chair of the Institute of Directors in the region, Denis Rooney. Mr Rooney said: ‘It is an indictment of our society that in the 21st Century constitutional politics is still taking precedence over economic strategy in the election debate.’⁴⁹

The Women’s Committee of ICTU allied itself with the *ad hoc* Women’s Policy Group and the statutory Equality Commission to add a four-page ‘Women’s Manifesto’ to the debate.⁵⁰ Supported by more than 50 women’s and other organisations in Northern Ireland, this not only addressed issues like domestic violence and sexual/reproductive health, otherwise entirely absent from the election agenda, but also highlighted the potential of the Sex Discrimination (Election of Candidates) Act 2000—unused by the Northern Ireland parties (outside of the NIWC)—to adopt women-only shortlists to improve the representation of women in the assembly. The *News Letter* covered the launch of the manifesto.⁵¹ And the NIWC leader, Monica McWilliams, was briefly reported on BBC endorsing it.⁵²

The student movement has been professionally organised in Northern Ireland for many years and has resolved the constitutional question by the interesting method of affiliating to the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland. NUS/USI wrote

⁴⁶ ‘Look up and out’, *Scope*, November 2003

⁴⁷ Jonathan McCambridge, ‘Disabled launch Polls Apart survey’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 10th 2003

⁴⁸ NIC-ICTU press release, ‘Trade unions raise bread & butter issues with political parties’, November 19th 2003

⁴⁹ Robin Morton, “‘Put economy first’”, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 17th 2003

⁵⁰ available from the Women’s Policy Group, c/o Women’s Resource and Development Agency, 6 Mount Charles, Belfast BT7 1NZ

⁵¹ ‘Remember women’, *News Letter*, November 11th 2003

⁵² *Newsline* 6.30, November 10th 2003

to all the party leaders to press for student issues—such as concern over ‘top-up’ fees—to be highlighted in their manifestos. The *Irish News* carried the students’ appeal.⁵³

In terms of employers, the Federation of Small Businesses hosted a question-and-answer session on the economy in a Belfast hotel. The *News Letter*’s business columnist commented ruefully: ‘At least someone is trying to put economic development at the top of the political agenda ...’⁵⁴

An offbeat, though entertaining and insightful, attempt to articulate alternative perspectives on the election was a production by the Belfast-based theatre company Tinderbox. *Vote! Vote! Vote!* consisted of read vignettes by leading Northern Ireland writers.⁵⁵ It played in Belfast, Newry and Derry in the days before the election and was followed each evening by an ‘Alternative Hustings’. Tinderbox billed the event thus: ‘Suitable for citizens, first time voters, the disenfranchised, the disillusioned, major, minor and medium parties and politicians!’ Particularly striking was a balcony monologue by Ian McElhinney, posing as the United Irishman Henry Joy McCracken returned from the grave and looking down over his native and now clearly divided Belfast, bemoaning the loss of the civic spirit by which the United Irishmen had been motivated.

An effort to boost turnout at the last minute was made by the city’s main civic actors of today. Leaders of all the business, trade-union and voluntary-sector federations marched behind a banner ‘USE YOUR VOTE’ against the backdrop of the shipyard cranes. There was prominent coverage in the *News Letter*.⁵⁶

⁵³ ‘Politicians told to prioritise student issues’, *Irish News*, October 22nd 2003

⁵⁴ Brent Bartlett, ‘Politicians seem to blame everything on the Agreement’, *News Letter Business*, November 11th 2003

⁵⁵ Simon Doyle, ‘The drama of election time’, *Irish News*, November 19th 2003

⁵⁶ ‘Electorate urged to turn out and bring back devolution’, *News Letter*, November 25th 2003

6 Issues highlighted or marginalised

6.1 Cue ...?

The media can take their cue in election coverage entirely from the political class or they can make their own soundings as to issues which are deemed by significant proportions of citizens to be significant. It can not be assumed that these correspond. Little attempt was however made by any of the media surveyed to make such a distinction.

BBC NI was something of an exception. In the week before the election it did carry out what it admitted was an 'unscientific' phone-in / e-mail survey as to how viewers would prioritise five social issues. Crime came out top, followed by long-term care for the elderly. And on the morning of the Monday before election day, there was a moderated forum organised *via* the BBC web site, where citizens could put forward questions to a panel from the four 'main' parties, but this was written up in a quite conventional way with the focus on the politicians' answers rather than the voters' questions.⁵⁷

This is despite the ready-made evidence of public attitudes from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. It provides a rich seam of data, *via* an annual large-scale survey which includes a module on political attitudes each year. Thus, for example, when asked in the 1999 survey what 'day-to-day' issue they felt should top the agenda for the assembly when power was transferred, 42 per cent of respondents said health.⁵⁸ Yet this was to figure only very briefly in the 2003 election coverage, when there was a spat between the SDLP and SF over the record in government of the SF minister, Bairbre de Brún.

Again, there is an interesting contrast here with BBC Scotland, where a reputable polling company, NOP / System Three, was commissioned to survey attitudes to a range of issues and rank them according to importance to respondents. Ms Atkinson of BBC Scotland said: 'Our view is that this is the people's election. We are not going to pursue the politicians' agenda but the people's agenda. It is our job to explain what the political parties' policies are and what they mean.'⁵⁹

Only one poll was conducted during the campaign (see below), by the *Belfast Telegraph*. This, however, covered the conventional ground of voting intention (never easy for pollsters to get right in Northern Ireland) and attitudes to the agreement. And ITC analysis of the 1997 Westminster election rang true for this assembly outing. As reported by the Electoral Commission (2001: 55-56), 'The evident excitement of the political commentators at the once every four years treat of a general election campaign was not

⁵⁷ See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/3234598.stm.

⁵⁸ See www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/1999/Political_Atitudes/ASSMDAY.html.

⁵⁹ *Holyrood*, March 11th 2003

shared by the viewers. The ITC's analysis echoed the wider findings of the opinion pollsters that the public wanted more information on policies and what the parties stood for, and less of the political gossip, campaign tactics and personality characterisation.'

6.2 'Apathy' and a 'low-key' campaign

A British politician was once accused of 'stirring up apathy' and the constant media references to the apathy factor in the campaign certainly did not suggest that the politicians' efforts had engaged huge public interest. And the eventual turnout of 63 per cent, extremely low by Northern Ireland standards and a drop of seven points on 1998, bore this out. But they also did not suggest that the media—the principal vehicle through which such engagement might have happened—had succeeded in this regard either.

At the outset, the Northern Ireland secretary, Paul Murphy, was challenged by the BBC presenter Noel Thompson about the 'high degree of apathy'.⁶⁰ He renewed this theme in his first big interview of the campaign on *Hearts and Minds*, with the UUP leader, Mr Trimble: 'Everyone's talking about the huge degree of apathy on the streets.'⁶¹

Similarly, the former Northern Ireland permanent secretary and ombudsman Maurice Hayes began his regular column in the *Irish Independent* thus: 'If the election was to be held tomorrow, it will [*sic*] be easy to forecast the result: Apathy first, the rest nowhere.'⁶²

The media did not, of course, carry responsibility for the unpropitious conditions in which the election was called (see above). A UUP-supporting columnist, explaining 'why boredom has been the central reality of this election', put it pithily in the *News Letter*: 'No-one knows what they are being asked to vote for. There wasn't an Assembly at the start of the campaign and there won't be one when the results are announced. The only thing that seems to be certain in people's minds is that 108 MLAs and assorted hangers-on will be paid to do nothing.'⁶³

Fear that an 'election to nothing' would prove unattractive, particularly to the critical moderate-Protestant constituency, lay behind increasingly vociferous media interventions by ministers to talk up the need to vote. On November 11th, Mr Murphy addressed that constituency specifically by invoking the spirit of Remembrance Day. At the Electoral Office in Belfast, he spoke of 'the sacrifice of so many men and women who gave their

⁶⁰ *Newsline 6.30*, BBC NI, October 28th 2003

⁶¹ *Hearts and Minds*, BBC2 NI, October 30th 2003

⁶² Maurice Hayes, 'Apathy could be the winner in a wavering democracy', *Irish Independent*, November 10th 2003

⁶³ Alex Kane, 'Past, present and future: if you don't vote, don't be surprised at the outcome', *News Letter*, November 22nd 2003

lives so that we could live in a democracy’ and urged ‘everyone entitled to vote to make full use of their democratic mandate’.⁶⁴ The *Irish News* included the Northern Ireland secretary’s exhortation in its election reporting.⁶⁵

Mr Murphy returned to the theme as the election approached. He toured the studios during the weekend before the poll and his line that it was ‘so very important’ was widely picked up.⁶⁶

Indeed, concern had evidently now reached the highest levels of government, with the prime minister referring to the election at the press conference to end an Anglo-French summit. The UTV political editor, Mr Reid, reported that Mr Blair had been ‘most strident against any voter apathy’ and he was cited urging voters to choose ‘the future, not the past’.⁶⁷ The government had been reported that morning to have received research evidence, commissioned jointly with Dublin, suggesting that SF and the UUP would emerge ahead of their communal rivals.⁶⁸ And that very evening, the UUP leader, Mr Trimble, concluded a party election broadcast with the suggestion that his party had its eye ‘on the future, not the past’.

So Mr Blair’s intervention was not just seen as a call to vote—though he said to ‘stay at home’ was to ‘make a choice’—but as a direct pitch for support for the beleaguered former first minister.⁶⁹ The *News Letter* duly made the story its page-one lead.⁷⁰ The taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, issued a similar call to vote, reported in the *Irish News*,⁷¹ emphasising—as did the prime minister—that the Belfast agreement would not be renegotiated.

But so it was that the election made the page-one lead in the *Belfast Telegraph*, for only the third time in the period surveyed, not in terms of the issues but the turnout. In what must rank as the most remarkable headline of the campaign, the paper splashed:⁷²

Election fears **Will YOU vote?**

- **Rival attractions include Man U and Rangers matches**
- **Weather forecast predicts freezing temperatures**
- **Coronation Street revelations may hit voter turnout**

⁶⁴ Northern Ireland Information Service, November 11th 2003

⁶⁵ ‘Use your vote says Murphy’, *Irish News*, November 12th 2003

⁶⁶ *Irish News, Good Morning Ulster, Morning Ireland, UTV Live*, November 24th 2003

⁶⁷ *UTV Live, ITV*, November 24th 2003

⁶⁸ ‘Four main parties are running neck and neck’, *Daily Telegraph*, November 24th 2003

⁶⁹ *Newsline 6.30, BBC NI*, November 24th 2003

⁷⁰ ‘Go and vote’, *News Letter*, November 25th 2003

⁷¹ Barry McCaffrey, ‘Taoiseach says GFA not to be rewritten’, *Irish News*, November 25th 2003

⁷² *Belfast Telegraph*, November 25th 2003

6.3 The communal ‘battles’

Even before the first election broadcast or the first party launch, the election was being ‘framed’ by the media in a clear and consistent way. It combined the language of the ‘battlefield’, inimical to discussion of ideas—and blind to the associated gender imbalance—with a focus on taken-for-granted ‘nationalist’ and ‘unionist’ political camps and their internal divisions.

Thus, for example, the UTV political correspondent, Mr Reid, began a studio two-way on the eve of the onset of the campaign proper on *UTV Live* with the comment that the ‘gloves are now off’. Asked by the presenter ‘How do you see the election shaping up?’, he answered: ‘The four main parties are really fighting for the heart of their respective communities—the battle for unionism and the battle for nationalism. In terms of elections they don’t get much bigger than this one.’

Pressed further ‘Well, in terms of the voters, the big question they’ll be asking you is what exactly are we electing to?’, Mr Reid said the review of the Belfast agreement would follow.⁷³

‘Review’ implies a process of deliberation but this too was quickly represented as yet another *negotiation*. For instance, the *Irish News*’ political correspondent elided the two in saying that ‘this election will prove to be highly significant in terms of who has the upper hand in forthcoming negotiations under the review of the Belfast agreement’.⁷⁴

That was a crucial framing as well, because the implicit message was that voters might not wish to elect the most reasonable deliberators but what the seasoned analyst Barry White would critically call ‘their toughest negotiators’.⁷⁵ Martina Purdy, the BBC NI political correspondent, did a piece to camera outside UUP headquarters, saying that (unionist) politicians were effectively saying ‘you decide: when we come back, who do you want to negotiate on your behalf—do you want David Trimble or do you want a new team in the DUP?’⁷⁶

This inadvertently went with the grain of the DUP’s own representation of the election. Mr Hamilton, its policy and communications director, told this project: ‘We’ve been trying to fight the election on that ground, that we want new negotiations, and I think

⁷³ *UTV Live*, UTV, October 27th 2003

⁷⁴ William Graham, ‘Less border-style politics in election’, *Irish News*, November 24th 2003

⁷⁵ Barry White, ‘Grit your teeth and pick a pro-Agreement candidate’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 8th 2003

⁷⁶ *Newslines 6.30*, BBC NI, October 27th 2003

we've been able to win that argument ... that an executive will not be formed after the election and that negotiations of some format will take place.'

If that framing tended to favour the DUP over the UUP, the exclusion of the SDLP from the round of talks leading up to the failed 'choreography' of October 21st was to the latter party's disadvantage. Ms Purdy again: 'Since Sinn Féin and not the SDLP were at the centre of the latest negotiations, there may be a perception in the voter's mind that Gerry Adams is the one who will be cutting the deal post-election.'⁷⁷ Noel Thompson put it to the SDLP leader, Mark Durkan, in a major interview, that 'no one wants to listen to you' and that his problem (as the prime minister had allegedly intimated to him) was 'that you don't have any guns'.⁷⁸

Televised exchanges involving leading DUP and SF figures recurrently descended into a claim by the former that the latter had been implicated in murder, met by the latter with counter-allegations about the involvement of the former in the paramilitary group Ulster Resistance. These exchanges quickly became vituperative. After the first, on the *Politics Show*, the presenter, Mr Fitzpatrick, astutely commented: 'To some extent you need each other. This is great for your voters. The DUP shouts at Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin shouts at the DUP. It motivates your people out. You need each other.'⁷⁹ He was right, but it didn't prevent similar episodes later in the campaign, on UTV and BBC.

But there was even a sense of journalistic relish of the verbal fisticuffs. The following week, the *Politics Show* included a debate between Mr Adams and Mr Durkan. Mr Fitzpatrick introduced it thus: 'This week it's a true gladiatorial battle between the leaders of nationalism.' And at the end of the programme, he promised more of the same the following week, when the UUP and DUP would 'face each other for 20 minutes of mortal combat'.⁸⁰

This framing did much to ensure the election debate, such as it was, was given an ethnic, 'orange-and-green', coloration, at the expense of other colours on the political rainbow. 'This election, in essence,' wrote Kathy Sheridan in the *Irish Times*, 'is about the SDLP versus Sinn Féin, and the Ulster Unionists versus the DUP.'⁸¹

The northern editor of the *Irish Times*, in a mid-campaign analysis, said that the 'stakes' were 'huge', going on to refer to the contest 'that will dictate which nationalist and unionist party holds tribal poll position'. Half-way down the story, he reported *en passant* that the 'smaller parties' had 'moaned' that 'the media focus on bigger parties was

⁷⁷ 'Election "won't be a cakewalk"', BBC News Online, October 28th 2003

⁷⁸ *Hearts and Minds*, BBC2 NI, November 6th 2003; see also *Fortnight* 407, October 2002

⁷⁹ *The Politics Show*, BBC NI, November 9th 2003

⁸⁰ *The Politics Show*, BBC NI, November 16th 2003

⁸¹ *Irish Times* weekend section, November 22nd 2003

squeezing them out'.⁸² On the same page, he referred in a constituency profile to the 'main Catholic or nationalist population' of Strangford, as if the act of birth leading to the first adjective necessarily dictated the electoral behaviour reflected in the second.⁸³

Another instance was UTV's first big election programme, which consisted of two parts. In the first half, six young men—three UUP supporters, and three DUP backers—were given a platform to challenge the SDLP leader, Mr Durkan, and the leader of SF, Mr Adams. In the second half, the UUP leader, Mr Trimble, and Nigel Dodds of the DUP were confronted by six young SDLP and SF backers (at least these were balanced by gender).⁸⁴

While the good intention was to sponsor intercommunal dialogue, the underlying premise was that ethnicity monopolised the political space. Everyone—politician or young person—had to be a 'nationalist' or 'unionist' protagonist. Inevitably, the format led to assertions dressed up as questions from the youngsters, challenges thrown back rather than answers from the politicians, much cross-talking and *intracommunal* bickering (among both interlocutors and interviewees), and a recurrent inability on the part of the chair, Mike Nesbitt, to ensure basic civilities were maintained.

This was even presented as true at the level of individual constituencies—despite the fact that the constituency profiles were the most likely election stories to raise 'bread-and-butter' issues. Thus a profile of Upper Bann in the *Irish News* quoted a *Portadown Times* representative saying: 'There are really two elections happening within the constituency—one nationalist and one unionist.'⁸⁵ And a survey of the Fermanagh / South Tyrone contest in the Enniskillen-based *Impartial Reporter* noted: 'Party workers have all fielded enquiries about many bread and butter issues: the future of the Erne hospital, jobs, the state of our roads, and policing have all featured. But, does anyone really expect anything other than voting along tribal lines?'⁸⁶

Another consequence of this framing was to render Northern Ireland's small minority-ethnic population invisible for the duration. Thus, for example, an *Irish News* constituency profile remarked in passing: 'Home to Belfast's only Jewish synagogue and the largest Hindu and Sikh communities in the city, the multi-cultural make-up of North Belfast is unlikely to play any part in the election.'⁸⁷ On election day the paper however reported how 'with the nationalist/unionist division still dominating debate' Muslim representatives felt excluded.⁸⁸

⁸² Gerry Moriarty, 'Significance of election yet to enliven the electorate,' *Irish Times*, November 17th 2003

⁸³ Gerry Moriarty, 'SDLP believes it can make up the difference and take a seat', *Irish Times*, November 17th 2003

⁸⁴ *Election Special*, UTV, November 6th 2003

⁸⁵ Anne Madden, 'The gospel singer and UUP leader do battle', *Irish News*, November 18th 2003

⁸⁶ 'Battle on both sides', *Impartial Reporter*, November 20th 2003

⁸⁷ Barry McCaffrey, 'Battle for six seats a "high-stakes lottery" for parties', *Irish News*, November 3rd 2003

⁸⁸ Bimpe Fatogun, 'Minority groups "feel left out of the process"', *Irish News*, November 26th 2003

Yet, as in other aspects, the dominant framing of the election did not go entirely uncontested. A reflective column by Barry White in the *Belfast Telegraph* set the context in terms of the nature of the Belfast agreement, and how it incentivised communalist behaviour: 'It's the same old problem for the leading parties as they face another election in which they want to finish the top unionist or nationalist party, rather than the one with the best cross-community support. We all know what happens to moderate, all-inclusive parties like Alliance which don't want to belong to either sectarian camp. They get run over by the tribal parties and find themselves excluded from crucial votes in the Assembly, because the blessed Good Friday Agreement says the only parties that count are unionist or nationalist.'

Richard Downes' coverage of the election for *Morning Ireland* was similarly considered. Invited by the presenter Aine Lawlor to answer the question 'So what is the point of the election?', given the assembly would not meet until after the review, he did a piece from the 'empty marble halls' of Stormont, which he described as akin to 'a vast liner heading for the rocks'. He interviewed the satirical northern commentator Netwon Emerson, who said: 'We don't know what we're having an election to.' The episode was, his interlocutor suggested, turning into 'two parallel referenda on whether we want to live together', on 'who will be the hardest case'.

Mr Downes ran some recorded footage of the 'fuss at the bus', on which Mr Newton's comment was not that this was lively and exciting but 'It's hateful, it's horrible'. He also added the insight that such behaviour could now be ignored—because it did not presage large-scale paramilitary violence any more. Mr Downes concluded his piece by warning of a falling turnout, likely to favour the 'zealots' as a result.⁸⁹

6.4 'Bread-and-butter' issues

In its report on the 2001 Westminster election, the Electoral Commission (2001: 69) noted that while coverage by the Northern Ireland media had been 'wide-ranging and in-depth', there was 'some concern' that they 'overplayed the constitutional issues of the election to the detriment of any discussion of other policies'. Such concerns attach to coverage of the assembly election too—albeit the context of its calling was not in the gift of the media.

Looking again at the way the various section of the media approached the campaign, the following table shows articles or items significantly defined by reference to the

⁸⁹ *Morning Ireland*, November 21st 2003

‘constitutional / political process’ and/or ‘party / assembly performance’. Thus articles could be logged as either, or, both or neither.⁹⁰

Media	Constitutional / political process	Party / assembly performance
Local weeklies	31	45
Regional dailies	277	234
Regional broadcasters (news)	64	30
Regional broadcasters (TV current affairs)	7	1
Dublin broadsheets	142	27
London broadsheets	34	0
International media	9	0

A similar pattern appears as before in the treatment of leader and subaltern figures, with little interest—and none whatever in the British and international media—in social and economic issues underlying the well-known political debate or in a dispassionate assessment of the performance of the parties or the outgoing assembly in this regard. The regional dailies figure, it should be stressed, is strongly affected by the *News Letter*. Particularly in its detailed constituency profiles, the paper majored on the ‘bread-and-butter’ issues, of which it ran nearly twice as many as the more conventional constitutional / political material. Both the *Belfast Telegraph* and the *Irish News* gave more weight to the latter category than the former.

Again, the relative import ascribed to the ‘constitutional’ and ‘day-to-day’ political issues by the media does not have neutral consequences. For the four ‘main’ parties were also the four parties of government in the outgoing coalition, whereas the three ‘smaller’ parties provided what was effectively the only ‘opposition’. A lack of critical focus on the performance of the former executive parties in government, therefore shielded them from the media spotlight to some extent.

The pattern was set by one of the first pieces on the election—a survey by the Press Association’s political editor, Dan McGinn, which dominated one of the op ed pages of the *Belfast Telegraph* on the night of the failed ‘choreography’.⁹¹ Headlined ‘The battle lines’, the article presented the approaches that all of 13 parties would take to the campaign as an inter-party trial of strength. Only at the end of his comments on the 12th party—the Greens—did Mr McGinn mention, *en passant*, a ‘bread-and-butter’ issue, when he referred to ‘genetically modified crops, transport and health’.

⁹⁰ This time constituency profiles are included, as these could be—and were—presented with varying emphases on one or other category.

⁹¹ Dan McGinn, ‘The battle lines’, *Belfast Telegraph*, October 21st 2003

The BBC did imply a greater commitment in this regard. A trailer run by BBC Northern Ireland on October 22nd showed news presenters Noel Thompson, Donna Traynor and Mark Carruthers on walkabout speaking to camera. Talking about how they would cover the election, Mr Carruthers specifically said they would report on ‘bread-and-butter issues’. This pledge was perhaps honoured more in the breach than the observance, however.

The main activity by the station in this regard was the rather superficial telephone poll mentioned earlier. This was not followed up by any attempt to address any of these issues substantively, once they had been so prioritised. A constituency profile, meanwhile, of West Tyrone was billed as addressing the claim, as Mr Thompson put it, that the election was focusing on the Belfast agreement at the expense of bread-and-butter issues. It took up the local hospital issue as well as recent job losses.⁹²

A positive example was the Northern Ireland section of the *Politics Show* on November 2nd. This was mainly devoted to a sustained engagement with and among three party figures, of whom two were female, principally on issues of party or assembly performance.⁹³ For example, the participants debated whether there should be free ‘personal’ as well as ‘nursing’ care for the elderly, the outgoing SF health minister having confined herself to the latter. All three interviewees expressed support for the idea and they were then challenged by the presenter, Mr Fitzpatrick, to indicate how they would pay for it. Would they seek tax-varying powers for the assembly, comparable with those (still unused) for the Scottish Parliament? All replied that they would.

Yet it was no coincidence that this lively debate was between Eileen Bell of the APNI, Mr Ervine of the DUP and Prof McWilliams of the NIWC. And the last drove home the message that in the campaign ‘this programme for the first time ever’ had provided the opportunity to discuss such issues. It was an opportunity not frequently to be repeated.

A brief bread-and-butter issue did surface early in the campaign when the SDLP launched an attack on the performance of the former health minister, Ms de Brún. SF was potentially very vulnerable on this, because the minister’s brief career had been marked by repeated delays in taking key decisions. So frustrated had the other parties become with her performance that in a remarkable show of cross-communal solidarity, the SDLP and the UUP had united in the assembly in support of a motion criticising their governmental colleague (Wilford and Wilson, 2002). In particular, she was open to the charge of having ducked the hard choice of acute-hospitals rationalisation, an issue which had been in her in-tray from the outset and was still ‘pending’ in October 2002—only for her direct-rule successor to grasp the nettle a few months later.⁹⁴

⁹² *Newsline 6.30*, November 19th 2003

⁹³ *The Politics Show*, BBC NI, November 2nd 2003

⁹⁴ See the May 2003 devolution monitoring report, available at http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/monrep/ni/ni_may_2003.pdf.

UTV Live carried footage from the SDLP press conference where the party's health spokesperson, Dr Joe Hendron, the former chair of the health committee, attacked the 'paralysis by analysis' which he alleged had characterised the department under Ms de Brún. But Dr Hendron's performance was shambling and Gerry Kelly of SF countered with the claim that his party had taken 'the challenge on' by selecting the post, along with that of education, when the executive was formed by the d'Hondt procedure in late 1999. None of the media assessed this claim, despite the fact that only health and agriculture remained as departments available to SF at the stage when Ms de Brún was appointed. Indeed, it was a great disappointment to professionals in the service that health was seen by all parties at the time as a 'poisoned chalice' because of the acute-hospitals issue (Wilford and Wilson, 2002).

The BBC NI political editor, Mr Devenport, described the SDLP 'bread-and-butter issues' challenge on health as an 'interesting experiment'. He meanwhile said a 10-point charter published by the UUP to paper over its internal divisions would form the 'constitutional/political core' of that party's manifesto, with 'health, education and so on' to be 'added on'.

The prospect of water charges—dodged by the outgoing devolved executive but promised by the direct-rule administration—did surface in the campaign. 'Water charges became a fiery election issue today as rivals for the Assembly vote claimed the issue was safer in their hands,' Chris Thornton began a report in the *Belfast Telegraph* on an exchange between the DUP and the SDLP, with the latter blaming 'inaction' by the former for the introduction of charges and the former responding that this was 'absurd'.⁹⁵ The report did not explain the background to the charges—the fact that ratepayers in the region pay only around half as much as council-taxpayers in England.

The economist and weekly columnist in the *Belfast Telegraph*'s business section did try to inject the hard choices of tax-and-spend into the campaign. Expressing unease that the draft budget—out to consultation at the time from the direct-rule administration—would not be a 'critical concern', he urged a focus on whether Northern Ireland was to catch up in revenue from the rates or forego the capital investment that this would finance.⁹⁶

The economy did however become an issue, if again only in a party knockabout way, in the *News Letter*. A DUP claim that the party was 'setting the agenda on economic issues' was rebutted by the SDLP, with the former finance minister, Seán Farren, asserting that investors were as likely to invest in a DUP-controlled Northern Ireland as in 'a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan'.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Chris Thornton, 'Water charges war heats up', *Belfast Telegraph*, November 10th 2003

⁹⁶ John Simpson, 'Will poll affect the NI budget?', *Business Telegraph*, November 10th 2003

⁹⁷ DUP and SDLP head to head on economy', *News Letter*, November 11th 2003

But the economics editor of the *Irish Independent* articulated continuing business concern. ‘It’s *not* the economy, stupid,’ his piece on the election campaign began. And he said: ‘Northern economist and business leaders ... really would like more hard thinking about the long-term economic future of the area.’⁹⁸

Similar concern was expressed from a more socially conscious perspective in a constituency profile on UTV. Julie O’Connor started her account of the contest in North Belfast with scenes of ‘peace walls’ and dereliction, before commenting: ‘But the social and economic problems that dog this area are unlikely to play a huge part in the upcoming election. It’s the green and orange cards that will predominate.’ And she concluded the piece to camera thus: ‘In many ways it reflects the overall picture in Northern Ireland, with an intense fight between republicans and nationalists, and within unionism.’⁹⁹

A particularly poignant moment during the campaign was the announcement of the closure of the remaining plants owned by the Desmonds clothing firm in the north-west of the region, with the loss of 300 jobs in the week before Christmas. The *News Letter* business columnist bewailed: ‘The unfortunate reality is that, beyond the usual hand-[w]ringing, this piece of news extracted no genuine response from the politicians, either those in power at the minute or those vying for seats in the new Assembly.’¹⁰⁰

He returned to the argument the following week, pointing out how the DUP manifesto talked about encouraging foreign investment from the EU accession countries, when they were actually competitors for inward investment themselves, and how (as indicated above) SF had suggested it was vigorously opposed to PFI when the former education minister, Mrn McGuinness, had opened PFI schools. But, he said, ‘in the TV studios ... where the election battles have been fought, none of these weaknesses has even been a topic for conversation, never mind a serious topic for debate. Instead all of the old arguments about the Agreement, the border and the Union have been trotted out as parties retreated en masse into their traditional camps.’¹⁰¹ (In fairness, Mr McGuinness was challenged once, by Mr Thornton of the *Belfast Telegraph* on a UTV *Insight* programme, on his acceptance of PFI as a minister. He shuffled off responsibility on to the prior direct-rule administration.¹⁰²)

⁹⁸ Brendan Keenan, ‘Economic issues? No one cares this time around’, *Irish Independent*, November 12th 2003

⁹⁹ *UTV Live*, November 13th 2003

¹⁰⁰ Brent Bartlett, ‘As jobs disappear, so does the public’s interest in politics’, *News Letter*, November 18th 2003

¹⁰¹ Brent Bartlett, ‘Economy barely makes agenda in battle for votes’, *News Letter*, November 25th 2003

¹⁰² *Insight*, UTV, November 20th 2003

Even the figures above are rather flattering as to the extent of ‘bread-and-butter’ coverage. Many stories had to be categorised as containing reference to both ‘constitutional / political process’ and ‘assembly / party performance’ but the overall balance in such general pieces was towards the former rather than the latter. And even stories that have been classified as ‘bread-and-butter’ often had a particular constitutional inflection. For example, when Pat Doherty of SF was reported as calling for an end to the categorisation of Northern Ireland produce as ‘British’ he had more in mind than narrowly agricultural considerations.¹⁰³

Moreover, as the former permanent secretary and *Irish Independent* columnist Maurice Hayes pointed out, ‘there is not much difference between the parties in these policies’, with all—in classic clientelist fashion—committed to ‘getting as much money as possible off the Treasury’. Dr Hayes also pointed to the peculiar arrangement whereby under the Belfast agreement ministers in the former devolved executive were appointed individually by application of the d’Hondt rule: ‘This has resulted in parties rubbishing the performance of their ministerial partners, demolishing the notion of collective responsibility in what turns out not to have been a coalition at all but a grouping of independent and competing ministerial fiefdoms.’ From which he concluded: ‘Voters may decide that if that is all it is, it is not worth coming out on a wet night for.’¹⁰⁴

6.5 The missing voters

The Electoral Fraud Act surfaced occasionally during the election campaign, in terms of references to the ‘missing voters’ who had not registered in September 2002 or subsequently via the rolling registration. The *News Letter* reported that the Electoral Commission report on the workings of the act would be published in December and was expected to show that 13 per cent of eligible voters had not completed registration forms.¹⁰⁵ A similar story appeared in the *Irish News* two days later.¹⁰⁶

The *Irish Independent* also ran a report on the issue, including reference to SF’s claim that the tighter registration requirements were ‘politically motivated’.¹⁰⁷ It returned to the issue with the claim that up to 50,000 voters under 25—one third of potential young voters—were not registered as a result.¹⁰⁸

The political correspondent of the *Belfast Telegraph* probed a little more deeply. To investigate the claim, following the leak reports, that the new register was a challenge to

¹⁰³ ‘SF’s food for thought’, *Irish Times*, November 19th 2003

¹⁰⁴ Maurice Hayes, ‘Get ready for a close-run thing at the polls’, *Irish Independent*, November 25th 2003

¹⁰⁵ ‘No votes for 170,000 residents’, *News Letter*, November 8th 2003

¹⁰⁶ ‘One in eight voters will not be eligible to cast ballots’, *Irish News*, November 10th 2003

¹⁰⁷ John Devine, ‘Voters fade from view as poll nears’, *Irish Independent*, November 10th 2003

¹⁰⁸ David McKittrick, ‘50,000 barred from crucial ballot’, *Irish Independent*, November 22nd 2003

the 'right to vote', Mr Thornton explored how much the old register had been open to fraud. Capitalising on the fact that the latter had been compiled just after the 2001 census survey, he demonstrated by comparing the two sets of data that in about one third of electoral areas there appeared to be more registered voters than adults. Indeed, in one area in south Armagh, 112 per cent of the adult population was entitled to vote! He concluded that fraud could have been 'significant' in such areas.¹⁰⁹

Whatever about missing voters, missing staff at the polling stations became a concern as the campaign progressed. The *Irish News* noted that 15 days before polling day the Electoral Office website was still advertising for presiding officers, poll clerks and count staff.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Chris Thornton, 'Election a test for anti-fraud measures', *Belfast Telegraph*, November 24th 2003

¹¹⁰ Catherine Morrison, 'Electoral office in staff shortage', *Irish News*, November 11th 2003

7 Anticipating the outcome

7.1 Predicting communal victors

With party / assembly performance issues marginalised, and the election reduced to twin communal battles, once the parties had nominated and the campaign had begun, there was, in a sense, little left for the media to do than begin to predict the winners on either 'side'. Had the voters been a jury, all the media would have been in contempt of court.

Thus three and a half weeks before a vote had been cast, the *Irish News* ran a piece predicting the communal victors: 'SF and DUP "should poll well"—academics'.¹¹¹ In similar vein, the northern editor of the *Irish Independent* began an analysis of the election thus: 'If Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams has not succeeded John Hume as the political leader of the Northern Ireland nationalists and republicans after the Assembly elections on November 26 both he and Sinn Fein will be gobsmacked. Conventional wisdom among the experts predicts that Mr Adams and Sinn Fein will emerge from behind the shadow of the SDLP to supplant it in the corridors of power.'¹¹²

Throughout the campaign, reporters and commentators were predicting how the 'smaller parties' would be 'squeezed'. Typical of such coverage was Aine Lawlor's introduction to a slot on RTE Radio on November 19th. First, she spoke of the 'fireworks' of the confrontation between the two main unionist parties at UUP headquarters the day before, lighting up the 'lacklustre' campaign; then she said there was no doubting the 'intense struggle' between the SDLP and SF; and she concluded by saying: 'Most pundits are predicting that this is going to be the election where the smaller parties get squeezed out.'¹¹³

And so it continued to the end. The weekend before the poll, for instance, RTE Radio billed its Sunday current affairs programme, *This Week*, with 'Who'll win and who'll lose in this week's northern elections?' And at the top of the programme the question was specified: would the DUP and SF 'become top dogs'?¹¹⁴

The prospect of such a polarised outcome, encouraged by publicity surrounding the *Belfast Telegraph* poll (see below), excited interest in the hitherto disengaged British broadsheets. On November 14th, the *Financial Times*,¹¹⁵ the *Daily Telegraph*¹¹⁶ and the

¹¹¹ Simon Doyle, 'SF and DUP "should poll well"—academics', *Irish News*, November 3rd 2003

¹¹² John Devine, 'SF will be gobsmacked if Adams not "the new Hume"', *Irish Independent*, November 10th 2003

¹¹³ *Morning Ireland*, RTE Radio, November 19th 2003

¹¹⁴ *This Week*, RTE Radio, November 23rd 2003

¹¹⁵ John Murray Brown and Roger Blitz, 'Paisley confident of becoming "top dog"', *Financial Times*, November 14th 2003

¹¹⁶ Thomas Harding, 'Good Friday deal in danger', November 14th 2003

*Times*¹¹⁷ all carried anxious reports indicating concern, reflected in government, that a triumph for the more radical parties—particularly the DUP—would have serious implications for the Belfast agreement.

This concern, albeit late in the day, represented something of a departure from the received wisdom about Northern Ireland in London and Dublin. For many years this had privileged ‘inclusiveness’ at the expense of all other political considerations—in particular the decline, increasingly worrying to commentators in Belfast, of any viable political centre to sustain power-sharing. Now the word ‘hard-line’, more characteristically deployed in divided societies to describe those furthest from the centre, was back in vogue.

But John Murray Brown (who has followed Northern Ireland closely over the years) set out the problem clearly, writing a piece from disadvantaged and strife-torn north Belfast for election day in the *Financial Times*: ‘North Belfast looks a snapshot of what some fear will happen across Northern Ireland today, as support consolidates around the parties of the two extremes. The hope that the election might mark a break with the past—with people voting not just across party lines but across the religious divide—looks likely to be dashed.’¹¹⁸

The *Guardian*’s Ireland correspondent, Rosie Cowan, concurred. She wrote: ‘Voters in Northern Ireland go to the polls today to elect 108 members to the Stormont assembly, even though there is little prospect of a quick return to devolution, and victory for the hardliners could push a power-sharing pact further away.’¹¹⁹

As election day approached, the international community began to share this concern, as evidenced by the commentary of major foreign media. Citing such Belfast commentators as the Queen’s University politics professors Paul Bew and Adrian Guelke, reports in *Le Monde*¹²⁰ and Reuters¹²¹ warned of the threats associated with a polarised outcome. And that was how they,¹²² the *New York Times*¹²³ and the *Washington Post*¹²⁴ reported the results, like *Die Welt*¹²⁵ in Berlin and the *Times*¹²⁶ and the *Guardian*¹²⁷ in London.

¹¹⁷ David Lister, ‘Ulster poll rejects peace accord’, November 14th 2003

¹¹⁸ John Murray Brown, ‘Fears of shift to parties of two extremes’, *Financial Times*, November 26th 2003

¹¹⁹ Rosie Cowan, ‘Decision day for Northern Ireland’, *Guardian*, November 26th 2003

¹²⁰ ‘Les élections législatives en Irlande du Nord mettent en péril les accords de paix’, *Le Monde*, November 25th 2003

¹²¹ Alex Richardson, ‘N Ireland peace pact hangs on election result’, Reuters, November 26th 2003

¹²² ‘En Irlande du Nord, la victoire des radicaux menace le processus de paix’, *Le Monde*, November 29th 2003; Alex Richardson, ‘Hard-liners’ gains leave N Irish peace plan on hold’, Reuters, November 28th 2003

¹²³ Brian Lavery, ‘Hard-liners gain in Northern Ireland voting’, *New York Times*, November 28th 2003

¹²⁴ Glenn Frankel, ‘Election sets back accord in N Ireland: hard-liners’ gains imperil agreement on power-sharing’, *Washington Post*, November 29th 2003

¹²⁵ ‘Extremisten in beiden Lagern liegen bei der Wahl in Nordirland vorn’, *Die Welt*, November 29th 2003

¹²⁶ David Lister, ‘Hardliners poised for poll victory in Northern Ireland’, *Times*, November 28th 2003

¹²⁷ Rosie Cowan, ‘Hardliners gain in Ulster poll’, *Guardian*, November 28th 2003

The *Irish Times* editorial in the aftermath, headlined ‘North’s move to the hardline’, summed up the new understanding. Describing the election as ‘a shock to the political establishment’, it said: ‘There was a determined shift by thousands of voters towards the two hardline unionist and republican parties at the expense of the moderate, middle-ground support for the Belfast Agreement.’¹²⁸

7.2 The *Belfast Telegraph* poll

The only poll to appear during the campaign was that in the *Belfast Telegraph*. This may reflect the unreliability of Northern Ireland polls in terms of the key party support question—as this poll again was to demonstrate—when the votes were counted. The editor, Ed Curran, indeed suggested that there was no commercial benefit to the paper in running such polls. The *Belfast Telegraph* did so out of ‘a sense of serving the community with information ... crucial to the political agenda’, he told this project.

The poll itself as usual focused on ‘constitutional / political process’ issues. Should the election have gone ahead? Will you vote? Who is your preferred first or deputy first minister? Respondents were also asked, however, to rate the performance of the party leaders, though only in general terms.

But the emphasis was clear: the state of the communal battles was being assessed. The paper led with the story, which began: ‘Northern Ireland is facing its toughest and tightest election test for many years ... According to the survey the Ulster Unionist Party is ahead of the DUP in the race for [unionist] votes in the November 26 Assembly elections. And the SDLP also registers ahead of Sinn Fein in the battle for nationalist voters. But the DUP and Sinn Fein are within striking distance of their rival parties ...’¹²⁹

7.3 Editorialising

Considerable unease appeared in the press during the campaign at the marginalisation of economic and social concerns—without reflection, however, on whether the media, as well as the political class, carried any responsibility for this state of affairs. Early on the *Belfast Telegraph*’s weekly business pull-out editorialised, under the heading ‘Bread and butter issues are still key’, that ‘as is usual in Ulster elections, social and economic policy will have to play second fiddle to the constitutional question’. Urging that the parties be ‘called to account on economic matters during the campaign’, it affirmed: ‘Guns and

¹²⁸ ‘North’s move to the hardline’, *Irish Times*, November 29th 2003

¹²⁹ Noel McAdam and Chris Thornton, ‘It’s neck and neck’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 12th 2003

government will dominate this election, but bread and butter issues are always going to matter more to most voters in the long term.’¹³⁰

The *News Letter* adopted a similar stance the same day. The paper claimed its reporters sent out to do constituency profiles were ‘discovering a range of issues which have little to do with the topics which traditionally divide the parties’, such as the future for farmers amid reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. And it commented: ‘Our ethnic politics are not geared to addressing the socio-economic realities with sufficient vigour.’¹³¹

The *Belfast Telegraph* weighed in on the same theme with its leader the day after. This concluded: ‘The only safe advice to voters, is to study the form, analyse the manifestoes and cast one-two-threes for the politicians who have bread and butter concerns to the fore.’¹³² And it returned to the fray later the next day to bemoan: ‘The reality is that two elections are being fought, for the unionist and nationalist vote, with little thought of compromise.’¹³³

The *Irish News* entered the editorial fray with a call for cross-community transfers on a pro-agreement basis. It argued that the ‘largely tribal’ tendency for ‘nationalists’ to vote within one camp was no longer appropriate ‘when there should be a consensus on the need for a return to a partnership administration’.¹³⁴ In expressing anxiety about the DUP’s likely performance, this broadly reflected the SDLP view, though—as the editor pointed out when interviewed for this research—the paper did not endorse the party as such.

Such a ‘pro-agreement’ coalescence by the voters proved a chimera, however. The *News Letter* took its cue from the UUP in condemning, as ‘naked’ sectarianism, an SDLP election advertisement which claimed responsibility for the replacement as chief constable of Sir Ronnie Flanagan by Hugh Orde.¹³⁵ And, on foot of its poll, the *Belfast Telegraph* warned: ‘Unless interest in the election quickens, and the campaigning encourages more transfers between the pro-Agreement parties, the divisions that plagued the first Assembly threaten to jinx the second.’¹³⁶

The *News Letter* subsequently urged its readers to look to those politicians ‘most likely to do the job of re-establishing stable devolution—and quickly’.¹³⁷ The *Belfast Telegraph*, clearly anxious about the evidence of polarisation in its commissioned poll, urged: ‘After November 26, negotiations will intensify and it is vital that parties with constructive

¹³⁰ *Belfast Telegraph*, November 3rd 2003

¹³¹ ‘Bring back devolution and quickly’, *News Letter*, November 3rd 2003

¹³² ‘Parties begin the battle for votes’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 4th 2003

¹³³ ‘Unionist splits could shred vote’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 5th 2003

¹³⁴ ‘Power to all our friends’, *Irish News*, November 11th 2003

¹³⁵ ‘Naked face of SDLP’, *News Letter*, November 12th 2003

¹³⁶ ‘Neck and neck in the race for seats’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 12th 2003

¹³⁷ ‘Time to make judgment on our politicians’, *News Letter*, November 13th 2003

policies are given a clear mandate. The greatest danger of this election is that people will stay at home.’¹³⁸

It was a fear echoed by the *Irish Times* as the campaign neared its end. The paper warned: ‘Apathy among voters is a matter of concern. Failure by the UUP to get out its vote could allow anti-agreement unionists to gain the ascendancy, thereby ushering in an extended period of direct rule.’¹³⁹

As election day approached, the *News Letter* became even more rattled. This time the ‘apathy’ problem was cast as a straight unionist message: ‘Unionists should not need reminding that if they fail to turn up at the polling booths, the election results would undoubtedly favour those politicians and parties who are committed to ending the Union.’¹⁴⁰ The *Irish News*, meanwhile, stuck to its pro-agreement line.¹⁴¹

The *Belfast Telegraph* repeated its annoyance at the election having been called without an inter-party deal and warned of the prospect of ‘a long period of stalemate’ if in a low turnout ‘extreme opinions’ prevailed.¹⁴² The *News Letter* said that ‘indefinite Direct Rule is simply unthinkable’.¹⁴³ In London, the *Times* said that ‘Ulster needs a high turnout from the moderate majority’.¹⁴⁴ And the *Irish Times* warned: ‘Any weakening of the middle ground will make it more difficult to implement the Belfast Agreement. Voters should bear that in mind when they go to the polls.’¹⁴⁵

7.4 Engaging the electorate

There were conflicting signals from this research as to whether the electorate was engaged by the media. The *News Letter* claimed a small increase in sales, albeit from a low level. The editor of the *Irish News*, Noel Doran, however reckoned that leading with a ‘political’ story would typically lose him hundreds of casual sales.

There were interesting innovations. The Press Association’s idea of putting a ‘bread-and-butter’ question on a daily basis to the candidates in a particular constituency was a challenging idea. And if the ‘personalisation’ of politics is rightly criticised, Geoff Hill’s offbeat profiles of individual political leaders in the *News Letter* added a human dimension to their often formulaic political expression. That newspaper’s constituency profiles were very diligently researched and made local issues come alive. Richard

¹³⁸ ‘Poll results set scene for election’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 14th 2003

¹³⁹ ‘Eight days to Northern poll’, *Irish Times*, November 18th 2003

¹⁴⁰ ‘Take time to exercise your right to vote’, *News Letter*, November 20th 2003

¹⁴¹ ‘Use transfer votes wisely’, *Irish News*, November 25th 2003

¹⁴² ‘Voters must use their right to vote’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 25th 2003

¹⁴³ ‘Casting your vote or not with help decide on the path Ulster takes’, *News Letter*, November 26th 2003

¹⁴⁴ ‘Time to be counted’, *Times*, November 25th 2003

¹⁴⁵ ‘The elections for the Assembly’, *Irish Times*, November 26th 2003

Downes' vox pops around the north for *Morning Ireland* teased out public attitudes to politics with sensitivity. But there is no doubt that much, if not most, of the coverage of the campaign was routine and repetitive.

The *News Letter*'s political editor, Mr McKeown, expressed concern as the campaign progressed about the yah-boo tenor of much of the debate. Writing that 'this election campaign is not one in which policies are likely to be discussed in any manner which might produce a programme for government', he went on: 'Claim and counter-claim look like poisoning a deteriorating election atmosphere—which, by turning an already-bored electorate off, may well affect the authority of the result.'¹⁴⁶

These are not, of course, problems confined to Northern Ireland. Indeed, an *Irish Times* piece with the immortal quote from one disengaged youth, 'Politics[:] it's about old people arguing', contended that apathy and cynicism about politics were indeed a sign that the region was becoming 'normalised'.¹⁴⁷ Yet if it were indeed the case that this were so, it would mean the media had no less responsibility than elsewhere to seek to counter this democratically unhealthy state of affairs.

Interestingly, at the end of the campaign the *News Letter* surveyed individuals at random in Belfast and two country towns as to what they had thought of the campaign. The reaction was very negative, with particular criticism of 'the squabbling on television' and 'the arguing and bickering', and the proportion of those who felt obliged to vote was clearly greater than those who had been engaged by the 'posturing' they had seen.¹⁴⁸ Maybe the gladiatorial media style has had its day, in an era when electors are more sceptical and unpersuaded.

¹⁴⁶ Ciaran McKeown, 'Never mind policy—just feel the vitriol', *News Letter*, November 12th 2003

¹⁴⁷ Liam Reid, 'Situation normal as apathy and cynicism rule in Belfast streets', *Irish Times*, November 7th 2003

¹⁴⁸ 'Voters to shrug off poll apathy', *News Letter*, November 26th 2003

8 Conclusion: a fourth estate?

8.1 Review, what review?

It was evident to any informed observer that there was little prospect of the assembly meeting and of any power-sharing executive being formed in the aftermath of the election. Yet there was very little effort in the media to explain why this was so, in terms of the technical requirements of the agreement for a ‘parallel consent’ vote for the first and deputy first minister, or the likely result of a possibly protracted period of direct rule if such a vote were not to be pursued in the aftermath of a polarised election. It was only by the eve of poll that the *Irish Independent*, for example, was reporting matter-of-factly that ‘a DUP victory seems likely to be followed by another lengthy spell of direct rule from London’.¹⁴⁹

And, indeed, the Northern Ireland secretary, Mr Murphy, made plain he did not intend to convene the assembly after the election, as he anticipated that such a vote would fail and he did not want to bind himself into a further elections six weeks later, as the post-agreement Northern Ireland Act of 1998 required. The *Belfast Telegraph* reported this, following an interview carried out by its US correspondent, but even then the story was on page 11 on a Friday evening and it is doubtful if many potential electors appreciated that the assembly they thought they were voting for was not even going to meet.¹⁵⁰ This even though, as Alex Kane explained in a brief RTE Radio essay, the review would be ‘the only show in town’.¹⁵¹

Nor, apart from representing the review as yet another negotiation, were the possible options for a review spelt out in the monitored media, although Ciaran McKeown of the *News Letter* began to do so with the Northern Ireland secretary in an interview published on election day itself.¹⁵² The *Belfast Telegraph* reported the pre-election announcement by Mr Murphy that the review would go ahead in December in just four paragraphs on page 7.¹⁵³

By representing the review as merely another inter-party arm-wrestle, the issues that might be addressed or the solutions that could be advanced were not teased out. The election was reduced to a naked communal, and intracommunal, contest for power—

¹⁴⁹ Dominic Cunningham, ‘Rain forecast could put a dampener on poll results’, *Irish Independent*, November 25th 2003

¹⁵⁰ Sean O’Driscoll, ‘Suspension plan on standby to avoid poll re-run’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 7th 2003

¹⁵¹ *Five-seven Live*, RTE, November 24th 2003

¹⁵² Ciaran McKeown, ‘It’s not over until it’s all over—and even then ...’, *News Letter*, November 26th 2003

¹⁵³ Noel McAdam, ‘Review set for next month’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 24th 2003

which could only have one outcome. In a sense, voters were thus detached from the consequences of their actions.

Only the SDLP-supporting *Irish News* columnist Tom Kelly pointed out, and again only on the eve of poll, the momentous significance the election could have: ‘By this Thursday we could be facing something worse than 30 years of violence. We could be facing a prolonged state of suspension as the extremes engage in a Mexican stand off that lasts for years. While the supremacy of Churchill’s “jaw jaw” over “war war” has been won, the prospect of Lanigans Ball antics of “stepping in and out” courtesy of a dance maestro (the secretary of state) could kill the public’s faith in democracy in Northern Ireland.’ His column was buried on page 24.¹⁵⁴

But then why was the election going ahead at all? This was another question that was hardly asked—though one person who did ask it, and asked why it wasn’t *being* asked, was the experienced northern editor of the *Irish Independent*, John Devine, who wrote: ‘The decision to postpone the Assembly elections in May, because of the danger of political eclipse it posed for the pro-Agreement parties, and then to call it for Wednesday [November 26th], when the conditions could be said to be even worse, has not been publicly scrutinised.’

In a caustic critique of the way the governments in London and Dublin had handled the failed ‘choreography’ of October 21st, Mr Devine pointed out that the ‘designer shambles’ had secured for SF ‘the right to have a go at pushing the SDLP out of the way’ and ‘delivered a substantial flattener to Mr Trimble.’¹⁵⁵

In the *Belfast Telegraph*, another seasoned commentator, Barry White, agreed as the results emerged. ‘So who is to blame for this nightmare scenario, in which neither DUP nor Sinn Fein can move, because that’s how they won their votes?’ he asked. ‘Step up Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, who failed to realise that David Trimble couldn’t afford another failure and yet set him up for an election and an unsatisfactory decommissioning event, that were bound to be his undoing.’¹⁵⁶

It was the same story in the article by Frank Millar introducing the *Irish Times*’ post-election analysis, in a piece dominated by a widely-run Reuters image of an imposing Mr Paisley. Mr Millar found Messrs Blair and Ahern ‘equally to blame as they find the political landscape transformed, the Belfast agreement paralysed and a hard political frost descending’. Writing that both had hitherto ‘enjoyed a largely uncritical press on this issue’, Mr Blair faced ‘harsh questions about his decision to cancel the election in April because there was no prospect of a power-sharing administration resulting from it and his

¹⁵⁴ Tom Kelly, ‘Tomorrow is the day to make a difference’, *Irish News*, November 25th 2003

¹⁵⁵ John Devine, ‘Extremists set to conquer middle ground’, *Irish Independent*, November 24th 2003

¹⁵⁶ Barry White, ‘Blair must sort out the mess he’s made’, *Belfast Telegraph*, November 29th 2003

subsequent decision to proceed in bleak November when the chances were no higher, and arguably less'.¹⁵⁷

The commentators' verdict was endorsed in the *Sunday Tribune*, which ran a vitriolic post-election editorial. The leader began: 'Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair have nobody to blame but themselves for the outcome of the northern assembly election, which has put the future of the Good Friday Agreement in jeopardy.' Attacking the two governments for not 'standing up to Sinn Féin' on decommissioning and paramilitary activity, it pointed out that, ironically, 'Direct rule was hardly the result the party had in mind but, unless something remarkable happens, that is how it will be for the foreseeable future.'¹⁵⁸

8.2 Challenging clientelism

The assembly election coverage was in many respects a policy-free zone. None of the parties' propositions was subject to any media scrutiny as to their feasibility or desirability. The *News Letter* columnist (and UUP adviser) Mr Kane complained: 'Manifestoes and policy papers are tumbling from the printing presses, stuffed with uncosted, unrealistic and largely unfulfillable promises. Publicity stunts and soundbite knockabouts have taken precedence over meaningful debate. The general public is utterly uninterested.'¹⁵⁹

An example was water charges. Radio Ulster ran a feature on the parties' positions on the subject, albeit confining itself to the four 'main' parties. But this merely consisted of four taped statements from the party representatives, when an alternative approach would have been for the business editor, James Kerr, to have contextualised the issue for the listener and then to have challenged them in one-to-one interviews. None was thereby pressed on the economic or political viability of their hostility—expressed by three of the representatives—to charges. And thus nor, indeed, did the programme raise the key issue of the equity of the system that would be adopted to pay for the necessary renewal of the system—since none of the spokespeople raised it.¹⁶⁰

A simple counter-example was a feature in the *Irish Independent* on the vexed issue of acute-hospitals rationalisation. While the piece quoted a DUP candidate pointing to a 'crisis in the health services' and SDLP criticism of the performance of the SF minister, Ms de Brún, it also injected the independent expertise of a University of Ulster academic, Gordon Murdoch. He pointed out that there were too many acute hospitals for the population if one wanted to improve standards but there were 'no votes in closing

¹⁵⁷ Frank Millar, 'Everything now hinges on Paisley', *Irish Times*, November 29th 2003

¹⁵⁸ 'Ahern and Blair to blame for north result', *Sunday Tribune*, November 30th 2003

¹⁵⁹ Alex Kane, 'Welcome back to surreal world of election stunts and soundbites', *News Letter*, November 8th 2003

¹⁶⁰ *Good Morning Ulster*, BBC Radio Ulster, November 13th 2003

hospitals’.¹⁶¹ It was in this atmosphere that the local doctor Kieran Deeny, defending the maintenance of acute services in Omagh, romped home as an independent in the West Tyrone constituency.

Not only did no one in the media take Dr Deeny to task over the issue of the trade-off between the number of hospitals in the region with acute functions and the standards of surgical care. But also there was almost no mention of the fact that the local SF candidates in West Tyrone were supporting the hospital in Omagh, though it had been their own minister in the devolved government, Ms de Brún, who had finally proposed—for consultation—that its acute functions should be removed. An exception was Jeanie Johnston in her constituency profile for UTV.¹⁶²

Policies as such were rarely reported upon at all. One counter-example was when the *News Letter* ran three articles on one day in the wake of a range of policy statements by contending parties: the SDLP on the economy, the DUP on education and the UUP on agriculture.¹⁶³ But again these merely listed in each case the parties’ proposals without analysis.

Indeed, the UUP press officer, Mr Benjamin, interviewed for this research, said he had expected the campaign would be ‘issues-driven’. But, he said, ‘the media have given all that stuff a wide berth, the press conferences on policy issues have not been covered and so it is very much stunt and personality-based’.

8.3 Assisting an informed choice?

In all of this, it is hard to see that the media, with honourable exceptions, assisted electors to make an informed choice in this election. The reduced turnout tells its own story.

And so, in a way, did one of the political correspondents. On election eve, Ken Reid was asked by the *UTV Live* presenter if the election was ‘to a review’. Mr Reid replied that there was ‘confusion’ as to what the election was about.¹⁶⁴ It is a confusion which the media really ought by that stage—accepting, again, that responsibility for the context of the election lay elsewhere—to have managed to dispel.

On the day after the election, based on an RTE exit poll, the outcome was clear. ‘It’s deadlock’ splashed the *Belfast Telegraph*.¹⁶⁵ In Whitehall, according to the *Daily*

¹⁶¹ Alison O’Connor, ‘An acutely unhealthy state of affairs’, *Irish Independent*, November 13th 2003

¹⁶² *UTV Live*, November 18th 2003

¹⁶³ *News Letter*, November 6th 2003

¹⁶⁴ *UTV Live*, November 25th 2003

¹⁶⁵ *Belfast Telegraph*, November 26th 2003

Telegraph's political correspondents, journalists were being briefed that politics in Northern Ireland faced a 'deep freeze'.¹⁶⁶

The next day, the *Irish Times* political editor, Mark Brennock, reported that, with the taoiseach and the prime minister due to meet later, 'there was growing concern in Dublin last night that Sinn Féin and DUP gains could transform the political climate in the north'.¹⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the *Irish News*, beneath a front-page cartoon of the leaders of the non-sectarian parties clinging together on an 'island of common sense' amid a 'tribal tide', led with: 'DUP and Sinn Fein gains cause devolution deadlock.'¹⁶⁸

That evening the *Belfast Telegraph* led with that old Northern Ireland sub-editor's staple: 'Polls apart: review on cards after DUP and SF surge'.¹⁶⁹ By the next night the lead was: 'Deal in jeopardy as talking begins'.¹⁷⁰

Yet it was almost like a train crash that all the experts could see coming, but the observers—the *Belfast Telegraph* from the outset excepted—had failed to anticipate. And, more importantly, to communicate the risk to the passengers in advance.

¹⁶⁶ *Good Morning Ulster*, November 27th 2003

¹⁶⁷ Mark Brennock, 'Ahern, Blair to review NI prospects today', *Irish Times*, November 28th 2003

¹⁶⁸ *Irish News*, November 28th 2003

¹⁶⁹ *Belfast Telegraph*, November 28th 2003

¹⁷⁰ *Belfast Telegraph*, November 29th 2003

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