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Democratic challenges facing cross-communal parties in consociational societies in the EU: Northern Ireland and Brussels

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This paper explores the impact that operating in consociational societies has on non-sectarian parties in two constituent regions of the EU: Northern Ireland and Brussels. It analyses the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland in order to illustrate the disadvantages faced by non-ethno-national parties and compares its experience with Pro Bruxsel. This paper focuses on the electoral impact of operating within an ethnic party system and the ways in which voting arrangements in consociational societies limit the electoral success of non-sectarian parties. It argues that in Northern Ireland, PR-STV disadvantages Alliance as it is not reaping the full potential of attracting lower order preference votes due to this system having been implemented with ethnically based parties in mind. In Brussels, the electoral potential of Pro Bruxsel is constrained by the requirement that parties register their list as either French or Dutch speaking, with no further option for parties seeking to appeal to both communities. This paper argues that this constitutes a democratic deficit in consociational societies in the EU that other European democracies are not faced with. Rectifying this deficit is, however, particularly problematic as consociationalism, which recognises and accommodates different groups, offers the greatest potential to succeed in managing conflict in divided societies.

1. Introduction

Whilst there has been considerable analysis of political parties in Northern Ireland, particularly the rise of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein and their cooperation in government (Mitchell et al., 2009), there has been very little focus on non-sectarian parties. Although the party system remains dominated by ethno-national parties (Mitchell & Evans, 2009),[1] non-sectarian parties nevertheless play a significant role in Northern Ireland's politics. Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (MLAs) designating

as 'Other' (ie. not 'Unionist' or 'Nationalist') hold nine of its 108 seats[2] and two of the thirteen senior Executive Committee positions.[3] From 2010 to 2015, one of Northern Ireland's eighteen Westminster Parliament seats was held by a member of a non-sectarian party.[4] The largest and most significant of these parties is the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland. Established in 1970, it seeks to break down sectarian divisions and promote a shared and integrated society through the formation of a Northern Irish identity that transcends divisions between unionists and nationalists (Farry, 2009).

Despite offering a radical alternative to Northern Ireland's major unionist and nationalist parties, very little academic research has been carried out on Alliance. Since 1998, the only published research has included the party's perception of the Good Friday Agreement (Farry & Neeson, 1999) and a study of its membership (Evans & Tonge, 2001). Whilst not focusing explicitly on Alliance, work by one of the party's MLAs, Stephen Farry (2009), includes many of its ideals in adapting Northern Ireland's institutions to facilitate a shared future. This paper, however, expands on this limited existing literature by providing an insight into the impact that operating within an ethnic party system has on Alliance, as the only significant non-sectarian party in Northern Ireland. It focuses on the effect of the preferential Proportional Representation – Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) electoral system used for all elections in Northern Ireland except those to the Westminster Parliament. The system is recommended for divided societies as it allows both inter-party and inter-bloc lower order preference votes, or transfers, to be cast, meaning that voters are not confined to one party or one ethno-national bloc (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006, 2009). Whilst literature is available on the actual and potential impact of the preferential mechanism of PR-STV on ethno-national parties in Northern Ireland (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006, 2009; Mitchell, 2014), there has been much less interest in how it affects non-sectarian parties.

This paper posits that Northern Ireland's electoral arrangements primarily disadvantage Alliance. Whilst smaller parties can benefit greatly from transfers, particularly from voters giving their first preferences to the two largest parties, the DUP and Sinn Fein, most voters give their first preferences to ethno-national parties and only make intra-bloc transfers (see NIA, 2007, 2011), which creates a difficulty for Alliance as the only significant non-sectarian party. Its dilemma is that in order to reap the full benefit of the preferentialism of PR-STV and maximise its electoral support, it needs to attract lower order preferences from voters of unionist and/or nationalist parties, as support for other non-sectarian parties, and therefore the

potential to receive transfers from their voters, is negligible. To make these appeals, however, would go against Alliance's entire *raison d'etre* by forcing it to surrender its staunchly non-sectarian position. This paper uses a combination of electoral results data and interviews with Alliance and other political parties' representatives to demonstrate that the PR-STV system is, on the whole, a disadvantage to Alliance. It argues that the party's non-sectarian status significantly limits its ability to attract transfers, whilst PR-STV greatly benefits smaller ethno-national parties, especially those of the unionist bloc.

Whilst this paper focuses primarily on Northern Ireland, a comparison will be made with consociational arrangements in Brussels in order to support its conclusions. It will argue that the only truly cross-communal party, Pro Bruxsel, is disadvantaged by the requirement that parties operating in Belgium register their electoral lists as either French or Dutch speaking. As a result, Pro Bruxsel must register one list for each to avoid endorsing one linguistic group over another, which significantly impacts upon the party's potential for electoral success. This paper is not intended to be a conclusive study into the impact of electoral arrangements on non-sectarian parties in consociational societies. A much more in depth analysis of a greater number of parties and cases would be required in order to provide this. Rather, this research is designed to simply offer an insight into how operating within an ethnic party system affects cross-communal parties in divided societies in the European Union (EU).

2. The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

Although Alliance presents itself as a non-sectarian party with the ability to appeal widely that comes with this status, its support is largely limited to certain constituencies. These include middle class, but not necessarily high income, residents of south and east Belfast, whose political positions are likely to be liberal and centrist or left of centre (personal interview, 4 November, 2013). It is, therefore, no coincidence that its support is primarily drawn from voters who are largely insulated from Northern Ireland's sectarian conflict. It is also likely to be higher in Protestant majority areas, which is attributable to the Catholic minority in these districts opting for Alliance in recognition that a vote for Sinn Fein or the SDLP is futile, and support from unionists dissatisfied with the DUP and the UUP (personal interview, 4 November, 2013). This has led to some characterising Alliance as a unionist party (Evans & Tonge, 2001: 105-06), which is also a result of it supporting the status quo of

the constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom unless a change is brought about under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

This perception has not been helped by Alliance MLAs redesignating as 'Unionist' in November 2001 in attempt to save the Good Friday Agreement from collapse and the party not fielding candidates in some constituencies at the local elections of the same year to assist pro-Agreement UUP candidates (Cochrane & Tonge, 2002: 60). It should, therefore, be of little surprise that almost 65 per cent of Alliance members are Protestant and only 20 per cent Catholic (Evans & Tonge, 2001: 111). It has, however, been claimed that support for Alliance is shifting from Protestants to Catholics due to dissatisfaction amongst the former over the party's role in the 2012 decision by Belfast City Council to stop the permanent flying of the union flag at City Hall (personal interview, 4 November, 2013).

At the 2010 general election, Alliance candidate Naomi Long achieved the unthinkable and won the Belfast East seat in the Westminster Parliament, although this has at least as much to do with discontent with the incumbent DUP MP and First Minister, Peter Robinson, than an indicator of genuine support for Alliance. Before and after this, however, the party's electoral strength has been comparatively limited. Based on first preferences, at the 2011 Assembly election Alliance recorded 7.7 per cent of the vote and won eight seats (Whyte, 2011), whilst at the 2014 European Parliament election it attracted 7.1 per cent of the vote but its candidate failed to be elected (Whyte, 2014). Much of this can be attributed to the 'ethnic tribune appeals' thesis, which argues that voters in Northern Ireland are drawn to who they perceive to be the stoutest defender of their respective ethno-national community, as they recognise that positions will become watered down due to multiparty bargaining (Mitchell et al., 2009). The electorate, therefore, does not vote in significant numbers for non-sectarian parties such as Alliance.

It is not only electorally that Alliance is disadvantaged by operating within an ethnic party system. The rationale behind MLAs in the Northern Ireland Assembly designating as 'Unionist', 'Nationalist' or 'Other' is due to key legislation requiring cross-community (ie. unionist and nationalist) support (McGarry & O'Leary, 2009: 71). As this privileges unionism and nationalism over other political identities, some critics of the Good Friday Agreement argue that this puts those designating as 'Other' at a disadvantage (Taylor, 2006: 218-19). Although broadly supportive of the Agreement and its institutions, Alliance MLA,

Farry (2009: 175-76, 179), argues that the designation assumes that ethno-national divisions are entrenched in Northern Ireland and would like it to be abolished, with this remedied by the introduction of a higher support threshold for the passage of legislation in the Assembly. Farry (2009: 176-78) also disagrees with the mandatory coalition formation based on the *d'Hondt* formula, whereby the number of executive positions held by a party is determined by the number of seats it has in the Assembly.

There is some flexibility to this method of executive formation, however, and this is one way in which Alliance has been able to use operating within an ethnic party system to its advantage. During the devolution of policing and justice powers to Northern Ireland as part of the Hillsborough Castle Agreement in April 2010, an impasse was created around the failure of ethno-national parties to agree on whether the position of Justice Minister should be filled by a unionist or nationalist, with agreement on this crucial in order for devolution to take place (BBC, 2010). It was, therefore, decided that the *d'Hondt* formula would not be used for the allocation of this position, allowing the parties to agree on the selection of Alliance leader, David Ford (BBC, 2010), whilst under normal conditions it would have been taken up by an SDLP representative. Whilst this paper primarily focuses on how Alliance is disadvantaged by operating as a non-sectarian party within an ethnic party system, this is one particular way in which it has been able to benefit from this status.

3. PR-STV and the Alliance Party

To return more explicitly to the focus of this paper, PR-STV is a preferential electoral system that allows voters to rank candidates. The number of preferences a voter indicates is left to their discretion, subject to a minimum of one and a maximum of the number of candidates on the ballot paper. The system is therefore relatively simple from the perspective of the electorate. The count, however, is more complex. First, a quota must be set which candidates are required to reach in order to be elected. This is determined by dividing the number of valid votes cast by the number of seats within the constituency plus one, and adding one to the overall total. If a candidate reaches this quota on the first count, they are elected. After a candidate is elected, their surplus votes (those in excess of the quota) are redistributed. The candidates with the fewest votes are eliminated in turn, with their votes reassigned according to the next preference of the voters who gave a first preference to the eliminated candidate. This process often requires several counts until all seats are filled. Ballot paper that do not

indicate lower preferences are considered 'non-transferable'. It is important to highlight that each voter only has a single vote, which is transferable until one of their preferences contributes to the election of a candidate (Sinnott, 2009: 115-24).

Although Northern Ireland has a relationship with PR-STV dating back to partition in 1921, and the system has been used for local elections since 1973 and European elections since 1979, its selection for Assembly elections confirmed it as the *de facto* electoral system. There are two main factors behind this choice. Firstly, as the need for representation of minorities is a fundamental principle of consociational democracy (Lijphart, 1977: 38-39), PR-STV can provide this essential proportionality. Secondly, the potential for its preferential method system to facilitate and reward centre ground politics is significant, as it opens up the prospect for the establishment of a more normalised political system that is less ethno-nationally focused by having the ability to incentivise party moderation to attract inter-party and inter-bloc vote transfers (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006). It is perhaps a symptom of Northern Ireland's ethnic party system that the focus when selecting a suitable electoral system was firmly on how it could encourage ethno-national parties to moderate towards the political centre ground, rather than facilitating the expansion of non-sectarian parties already occupying this territory. As such, whilst some research has been undertaken into the impact of PR-STV on ethnic parties (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006: 69, 2009: 64; Mitchell, 2014), Alliance has, on the whole, been excluded from it. This paper seeks to remedy this significant oversight.

Like all parties contesting elections under PR-STV, first preference votes are of paramount importance to Alliance and it is these that the party, first and foremost, seeks to attract (personal interview, 4 November, 2013). Alliance, nevertheless, is inter-party 'transfer friendly' in that it is willing to receive transfers from voters giving their first preferences to other parties and for its first preference voters to transfer to other parties (personal interviews, 25 November, 2013; 2 December, 2014). Whilst larger parties are more concerned with receiving first preference votes, attracting inter-party transfers is an important strategy for smaller parties in Northern Ireland in order to maximise their electoral success. Evidence from the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election supports this. Within unionism, the smaller UUP received almost 4,700 (or approximately twenty nine per cent) more inter-party lower order preference votes than its larger ethno-national bloc rival, the DUP (NIA, 2011: 8-9). Similarly, in the nationalist bloc, the smaller SDLP attracted almost 12,000 (or

approximately 172 per cent) more inter-party transfers than rivals Sinn Fein (NIA, 2011: 8-9).

The only major ethno-national party to receive more than three per cent of its inter-party transfers from those who gave their first preference votes to a candidate of a party of the opposite bloc was the SDLP, with sixteen per cent of its lower order preferences obtained from voters of unionist parties (NIA, 2011: 8-10). A more significant finding, however, is that every party surveyed,[5] except the DUP, the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) and the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), received more inter-party transfers from voters giving their first preferences to candidates of parties designating as 'Other' than they did from those of their own community (NIA, 2011: 8-10). This demonstrates that voters of non-sectarian parties, such as Alliance, are nevertheless willing to engage in ethno-national voting in the form of giving transfers to candidates of unionist and nationalist parties.

To shift the focus of this paper towards the act of non-sectarian parties *receiving* transfers, rather than first preference voters of these parties *giving* them, it is clear that PR-STV has significant potential to benefit non-ethno-national parties in this way. As previously suggested by the 'ethnic tribune appeals' thesis and demonstrated using transfer data, Northern Ireland remains an ethnic party system, which is corroborated by more than 86 per cent of first preference votes cast at the 2011 Assembly election going to unionist or nationalist party candidates (Whyte, 2011). This, however, creates an opportunity for non-sectarian parties as PR-STV allows voters to continue to give their first preferences to unionist and nationalist parties but transfer to non-ethno-national parties further down the ballot. Alliance has had some success in attracting lower order preference votes from this cohort. At the Northern Ireland Assembly election of 2011, fifty per cent of transfers received by the party were from voters who gave their first preferences to candidates of unionist or nationalist parties (twenty four per cent and twenty six per cent respectively) (NIA, 2011: 9). This indicates that whilst Northern Ireland is ultimately an ethnic party system, Alliance is still able to benefit somewhat from the preferential ranking mechanism of PR-STV.

Despite this benefit, however, Alliance is unable to reap the full potential of PR-STV. The problem arises from Northern Ireland's ethnic party system and Alliance's hegemonic position as the only significant party of the comparatively small 'Other' designation. There is strong evidence within unionism and nationalism of voters remaining in-bloc when

transferring. This is especially acute within the unionist community, with sixty two per cent of inter-party transfers received by the DUP and thirty six per cent obtained by the UUP at the 2011 Assembly election originating from voters who gave their first preference votes to unionist candidates (NIA, 2011: 8-9). Though less prevalent, this is also a significant phenomenon within the nationalist bloc, with twenty two per cent of Sinn Fein's inter-party lower order preference votes and twenty nine per cent of the SDLP's coming from those who gave their first preference votes to a nationalist candidate (NIA, 2011: 8-9).

The problem for Alliance is not that it is completely unable to attract intra-bloc transfers, as fifty per cent of its lower order preferences received at the 2011 Assembly election originated from voters giving their first preferences to 'Others' (NIA, 2011: 9). Rather, it is that the 'Other' bloc is considerably smaller than both the unionist and nationalist blocs, with no other parties from which Alliance is able to obtain significant transfers from the voters of. To contextualise this, whilst more than forty five per cent of first preference votes cast at the 2011 Assembly election were for unionist party candidates and more than forty one per cent were for nationalist party candidates, less than ten per cent went to candidates of parties designating as 'Other' (Whyte, 2011). As a consequence, Alliance must rely much more heavily on attracting inter-bloc transfers to maximise its electoral potential than must unionist or nationalist parties. These transfers, on the whole, do not come (see, for example, NIA, 2011: 9).

The problem faced by Alliance is compounded by the fact that ethno-national parties can, and do, enter into informal intra-bloc 'transfer pacts' whereby a party advises its first preference voters to transfer to another party in the hope that this will be reciprocated by the 'receiving' party. This strategy is particularly prevalent amongst unionist parties. The UUP's policy is to encourage the electorate to vote for its candidates first and then transfer to other unionist candidates in order of preference (personal interview, 13 June, 2013), whilst the DUP manifesto for the 2009 European Parliament election, for example, explicitly requested that voters 'Vote DUP number 1 and then transfer to other unionist candidates' (DUP, 2009: 10). There is, however, no evidence of these arrangements within the nationalist bloc, most probably due to historical factors and intra-bloc rivalry arising from the 'nationalist' SDLP and 'republican' Sinn Fein. Nevertheless, first preference voters of these parties, as aforementioned, transfer to and from each other's candidates in significant numbers, with both parties being considerably advantaged by this. Alliance's difficulty is that there is no

worthwhile 'Other' party for it to enter into a 'transfer pact' with, or even to benefit from the receipt of transfers from on a more informal basis. The only other noteworthy party of the 'Other' bloc, the Green Party in Northern Ireland, received less than one per cent of first preference votes cast at the 2011 Assembly election (Whyte, 2011), meaning such an arrangement would be of little electoral benefit to Alliance.

The obvious solution for Alliance would be for it to encourage its first preference voters to transfer to one or more of Northern Ireland's larger parties in the hope that they would reciprocate the advice, as it has already been shown that first preference voters of 'Other' party candidates often cast inter-bloc lower order preferences. As a non-sectarian party, however, Alliance is unable to do this as all other significant parties in Northern Ireland are ethno-national. A 'transfer pact' with any of these parties would, therefore, question Alliance's entire *raison d'etre* and would be likely to lead to accusations that the party is not genuinely non-sectarian (personal interviews, 4 November, 2013; 25 November, 2013). The party nevertheless hopes that its first preference voters transfer to those who share its agenda and outlook, regardless of whether they are unionist, nationalist or 'Other', and cites the significant number of its voters who transferred to the SDLP at the 2014 European election as an example of this taking place (personal interview, 2 December, 2014). It is not Alliance policy, however, to encourage its first preference voters to transfer to the SDLP or indeed any other party (personal interview, 2 December, 2014). Its non-sectarian position is clearly disadvantaging the party and is preventing it from reaping the full benefits of PR-STV.

4. The case of Pro Bruxsel

In order to sufficiently explore the impact of consociational arrangements in Brussels, it is first necessary to consider the wider historical context of its parent state, Belgium. The country has experienced non-violent ethno-linguistic conflict since its inception as a state in 1830 between Dutch speakers in the northern region of Flanders and French speakers in southern Wallonia, with the capital, Brussels, officially bilingual despite its location within Flanders (Deschouwer, 2004: 1-9. See also 2006; 2009). This was ultimately a result of the predominance of the French language in public life. After the issue gained considerable salience in the post-World War II era, Belgium was territorially divided in 1970 into three federal regions: Dutch-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia and bilingual Brussels, each with its own regional parliament alongside a federal parliament, with the latter featuring

an equal number of government ministers from both linguistic communities, with members of the legislature allocated proportionally from each of the three regions (Deschouwer, 2004: 14, 17).

Whilst in Northern Ireland parties form a post-election mandatory coalition, at both the federal and regional level in Belgium parties form a voluntary post-election coalition, with the aforementioned ethno-linguistic executive designation in Brussels ensuring that both communities are represented (Deschouwer, 2004: 19-20). Legislative seats in the parliament of the Brussels-Capital region are proportionally pre-allocated to both communities on the basis of their numerical size, whilst consociationalism is also a feature of cabinet formation in the Brussels Government, with the prime minister elected by a majority of both language groups in the parliament (in practice this position is occupied by a member of the French speaking community), with two further ministers for each of the two linguistic groups and a simple majority required for the passage of legislation on regional matters (Deschouwer, 2004: 19-20). Consociational arrangements in Brussels, and in the wider context of Belgium, are thus highly complex, due to the complicated ethno-linguistic composition of the state.

In Belgium, elections are contested using proportional representation (PR) with semi-open lists, with the Brussels-Capital region a single multimember constituency (Pilet, 2005: 406). The electorate can, therefore, vote for one party's list or indicate intra-party preferences for candidates. Significantly, however, they can only cast a vote for one party and/or candidates representing that party. This differs to Northern Ireland, where PR-STV allows voters to transcend party lines. Most importantly, for all elections in Belgium there are no bilingual lists (Pilet, 2005: 406). In the Brussels-Capital region, voters are presented with a ballot paper that includes parties that are designated as Dutch-speaking and as French-speaking, with this distinction indicated, and are able to choose among them as there is no linguistic pre-identification for voters (Pilet, 2005: 403). Unlike in Northern Ireland, positions in the parliament of the Brussels-Capital region are proportionally pre-allocated to both communities, with seventy two assigned to the French-speaking group and seventeen to the Dutch-speaking group (Deschouwer, 2004: 19). Significantly for cross-communal parties, it is necessary to reach a threshold of at least five per cent of the popular vote in order for a party to receive representation at either federal or regional level (Deschouwer, 2009: 120). This is not a requirement in Northern Ireland, where it is sufficient for a candidate to simply win enough votes to be elected in an individual constituency.

The vast majority of political parties in Belgium are strictly organised along ethno-linguistic lines and identify with one of the two main communities, with only Dutch-speaking parties contesting elections in Flanders and only French-speaking parties standing in Wallonia, but with all contesting bilingual Brussels (Deschouwer, 2004: 9-11). It is for this reason that the focus is on Brussels rather than its parent state, as it is only in the bilingual capital that there is any meaningful potential for cross-communal parties (Pilet, 2005: 403). Pro Bruxsel, a minor party operating exclusively in Brussels, has been hailed as 'the first and only bilingual political party in Belgium' and was established in 2008 to challenge what it considers to be the discrimination of the city's inhabitants on the basis of language (Euractiv.com, 2009). It has very limited electoral support, receiving 1.24 per cent and 0.72 per cent of votes of the respective Dutch and French linguistic groups at the 2014 Brussels regional election (Elections 2014, 2014). As a result of Belgium's strict linguistic electoral requirements the party must submit lists to both Brussels's French and Dutch linguistic group electoral designations, despite its bilingual status. This disadvantages Pro Bruxsel in two main ways.

Firstly, it prevents the party from presenting a genuinely cross-communal position that is not influenced by linguistic divisions, as it would undoubtedly wish to do so. Being forced to submit lists to both language groups goes some way towards enforcing the perception that it is two different parties contesting an election under the same banner. Secondly, having two different lists on the ballot paper makes it less likely that Pro Bruxsel will achieve the five per cent of the popular vote threshold required for election. This is a significant limitation for the party, as whilst it wishes to uphold its genuinely bilingual status, the primary rationale of any political party is to be elected. In order to overcome this difficulty, another party operating on a cross-communal basis, Partij van de Arbeid van Belgie / Parti du Travail de Belgique (PvdA/PTB) (Worker's Party of Belgium), submit only one list for the Brussels regional elections, alternating between the French and Dutch language electoral groups (Elections 2014, 2014). Whilst the party undoubtedly does this to maximise its potential for electoral success, this approach does question its ability to present a truly cross-communal position, as it is probable that some members of the French-speaking community would be dissuaded from voting for a party whose list is included under the Dutch-speaking designation and vice versa. The requirement to submit a list to one of the two language groups (or, in the case of Pro Bruxsel, to both), with no alternative bilingual option, and the ramifications of this, is an

important way in which non-sectarian parties operating in Brussels are disadvantaged by the consociational arrangements in place in Belgium.

5. Analysis and summary

In Northern Ireland, the institutions implemented by the Good Friday Agreement have significant disadvantages for non-sectarian parties, such as the community designation system used in the Northern Ireland Assembly favouring 'Unionists' and 'Nationalists' in the passage of key legislation requiring cross-community support. Advantages for parties of the 'Other' bloc are comparatively limited. It is, nevertheless, important to recognise that the preferential ranking mechanism of PR-STV is of some benefit to non-sectarian parties such as Alliance. It is necessary to highlight the potential it offers Northern Ireland's smaller parties in particular, whether ethno-national or not, to maximise their electoral support by supplementing their share of the vote through the acquisition of lower order preferences. The benefit of this to Alliance is that it allows voters to continue to give their first preferences to candidates of unionist or nationalist parties and transfer to it, which is important as Northern Ireland remains an ethnic party system, with most of the electorate voting for ethno-national parties. This paper, nevertheless, concludes that PR-STV is, on the whole, a disadvantage for Alliance. As most unionist and nationalist first preference voters make only intra-bloc transfers, the system does not reward Alliance as much as it is does sectarian parties, as the 'Other' bloc is small and includes no other significant parties. Perhaps unsurprisingly given their prevalence in Northern Ireland, PR-STV was primarily selected, at least for elections to the Assembly, with the impact it would have on unionist and nationalist parties in mind.

Reforming Northern Ireland's institutions with the aim of catering more for cross-communal parties would, however, be problematic. Whilst there is some credibility to the aforementioned suggestion of Farry (2009: 175-76, 179) that the designation system should be abolished in favour of the need for a 'super majority' to be reached for the passage of legislation in the Assembly, this would prevent the demonstration of fully cross-communal support. As the principles of the Good Friday Agreement lie in recognising and accommodating the needs and wishes of unionists and nationalists, this is likely to be unworkable. Similarly, amending PR-STV to an alternative system is ultimately unfeasible for two main reasons. Firstly, as a major factor behind its use in Northern Ireland is to ensure that minorities are represented (Lijphart, 1977: 38-39), non-proportional systems such as first

past the past and the alternative vote would decrease the likelihood of this being achieved. Secondly, a further factor behind its use is its potential to incentivise moderation of parties towards the centre ground in order to attract inter-party and inter-bloc vote transfers (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006). As other proportional systems such as party list PR are not preferential, they do not have the ability to achieve this and are, therefore, unlikely to be considered suitable for Northern Ireland.

As a point of comparison, the drawbacks arising from Belgium's strict consociational arrangements are even greater for cross-communal parties operating in Brussels than they are in Northern Ireland. The requirement that parties must choose to submit their electoral list to either the French or Dutch language group designation not only severely impacts upon the ability of a party to present a genuinely bilingual position, but also decreases the likelihood that it will achieve the five per cent of the popular vote threshold necessary in order to be elected. The effects of this could of course be mitigated by the introduction of a 'bilingual' or 'other' group designation, similar to that used in the Northern Ireland Assembly, on ballot papers in the Brussels-Capital region and in Belgian governmental institutions. This, however, would require a wholesale restructuring of Belgium's consociational arrangements, which may significantly disrupt an already fragile system.

Whilst this paper argues that the disadvantages faced by cross-communal parties in consociational societies constitute a democratic deficit that other EU democracies are not subjected to, it nevertheless acknowledges that it is a deficit that is largely impossible to overcome. Only consociational arrangements that recognise and accommodate different communities have the potential to succeed in managing conflict in deeply divided societies. An unfortunate consequence of this is that cross-communal parties are significantly disadvantaged by operating within a system that is designed primarily with ethnically-based parties in mind. To make significant reforms to consociational power sharing institutions would, on the whole, be likely to do more harm than good to prospects for sustainable conflict management. Ultimately, the disadvantages faced by cross-communal parties in divided societies are simply something that they themselves have to establish the most suitable way of working around.

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[1] These parties are, principally, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) (unionist), and Sinn Fein, and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) (nationalist).

[2] Eight of the MLAs designating as 'Other' are of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland and one is of the Green Party in Northern Ireland.

[3] Both of the Northern Ireland Executive posts held by MLAs designating as 'Other' are filled by members of the Alliance Party. Stephen Farry is Minister for Employment and Learning, and David Ford is Minister of Justice.

[4] Naomi Long MP of the Alliance Party represented the Belfast East constituency.

[5] These are the DUP, Sinn Fein, the UUP, the SDLP, Alliance, the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Green Party.