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Trends. Elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly: The Psychological Aftermath

Editor

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Many political pundits are making much of the strong showing of the Democratic Unionists, the support for the UK Unionists and Independents, and the reality of defectors from the Ulster Unionist Party in the recent Northern Ireland elections. The "word to the wise" is that such a grouping against the Northern Ireland peace accords will be able to wreak havoc within the Northern Ireland Assembly, seriously impede initiatives for meetings between ministers of the new Northern Ireland Government and their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, and threaten the peace accord itself.

However, a strong case can be made that the showing of opponents of the accord actually bodes well for the accord's supporters. One can predict--in a manner consistent with the psychology of ingroups and outgroups--that the threat from anti-accord unionists will foster a greater probability for cohesiveness, homogeneity, and cooperation among pro-accord unionists and nationalists. Without the anti-accord unionist threat, fragmentation within, between, and among pro-accord groups might more likely occur. Because the fate of Northern Ireland ultimately hinges on unionists and nationalists--largely Protestants and Catholics respectively--working together, the anti-accord forces may be unknowingly working against themselves. Anti-accord leader Gregory Campbell has been cited stating that "Anything in the assembly that is likely to lead us closer to the Republic of Ireland we will block, we will vote against and we will endeavor to stop." Does this include anti-accord efforts themselves? And how about provocations during the Marching Season? (See Connolly, F. (June 28, 1998). Rattled Trimble to be First Minister. *The Sunday Business Post Online*, <http://www.sbpost.ie/newspaper.html>; Gaertner, S.L., Dovidio, J.F., & Bachman, B.A. (1996). Revisiting the contact hypothesis: The induction of a common ingroup identity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 20, 271-290; Hoge, W. (June 28, 1998). Vote for Assembly realigns Northern Ireland loyalties. *The New York Times*, p. 4Y; RM_Distribution. (June 27, 1998.) Flash: Election leaves precarious balance--full results, rmlist-reply@irlnet.com; Rothberger, H. (1997). External intergroup threat as an antecedent to perceptions in ingroup and outgroup homogeneity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 1206-1212; Van Oudenhoven, J.P., Groenewoud, J.T., & Hewstone, M. (1996). *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, 649-661.) (Keywords: Elections, Northern Ireland, Psychological Impact.)