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“Public opinion and the future of Northern Ireland”

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Abstract

In the late twentieth century, as the view that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would be determined by the wishes of a majority gained increasing acceptance, demographic and electoral data appeared to point towards a stable position: a predominantly Protestant population, strongly supporting the United Kingdom, would continue to outvote the Catholic minority, which supported Irish unity. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, this axiom was challenged by two new realities: a shift in the demographic balance in favour of Catholics, offset by growing support among Catholics for retention of the Union. The explicit articulation in the Good Friday agreement of 1998 of the principle that constitutional change would be determined by democratic wishes appeared to give this matter added salience. But the complex character of the agreement's provisions for constitutional change, the complexity of patterns of demographic development, the subtleties of public opinion and shifting geopolitical realities make it difficult to predict future trends and outcomes with any degree of certainty.

Key words: Northern Ireland, public opinion, demography, devolution, British-Irish relations

Introduction

The core constitutional components of the Good Friday agreement are highly unusual from a comparative perspective. Unlike other agreements designed to resolve territorial boundary disputes, they leave the long-term political status of Northern Ireland undefined; indeed, this absence of definition is a core component of the agreement itself. While the British and Irish governments acknowledged that “the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, freely exercised and legitimate, is to maintain the Union”, they also committed themselves to transferring Northern Ireland from British to Irish jurisdiction should a majority in Northern Ireland so wish, and should the agreement of the people of the Republic also be forthcoming.

This commitment, which continued and developed further the shared formal position of the two governments since 1973, attributes a particular significance to public opinion, and seems to base the future of Northern Ireland firmly on the collective decision of a divided society. This paper explores what thus appears to be a crucial question: the shape of public opinion in Northern Ireland. It begins by assessing such evidence as we have about public opinion in the run-up to the civil unrest that began in 1968 – evidence that appears to be compatible with the view that political priorities were determined by religious affiliation, even if the strength of this relationship was weakening by the late 1960s. It continues by

examining the demographic evolution of Northern Ireland, targeting specifically the Protestant-Catholic balance. It goes on to look at the characteristic political profile of the two communities as reflected in public opinion surveys at the turn of the century, a feature of central importance for the future evolution of Northern Ireland. It concludes by revisiting the constitutional question and re-examining the significance of public opinion and demographic trends for this, in the context of a formal agreement whose implications are constitutionally conservative.¹

Religion and the constitutional question before the “troubles”

The extent to which Irish electoral behaviour in the nineteenth century was structured by religious affiliation is well known, and forms an important backdrop to the debate on the constitutional question: Irish identity became increasingly identified with Catholicism, leaving little space for a Protestant presence (Elliott, 2009: 20-50). Associated with this was a growing demand among Catholics for Irish self-government, triggering passionate Protestant defence of the union with Great Britain. While we lack survey data before the late 1960s, there is sufficient evidence from elections and enough commentary from observers to confirm the closeness of the relationship between religion and politics. We may consider three aspects of this: information on the behaviour of individual voters from nineteenth-century poll books, aggregate data on electoral behaviour and demographic characteristics, and the judgements of informed external parties. While these sources converge in suggesting a deterministic relationship between religion and politics, though, important insights from a major benchmark study in early 1968 suggest that the hard attitudes of the past were beginning to soften.

One of the lesser-used sources for analysis of the behaviour of nineteenth-century Irish voters is the set of “poll books” that commonly appeared after elections, either as standalone pamphlets or newspaper reports or supplements. Up to the coming into effect of the Ballot Act of 1872, voters publicly declared the names of the candidate or candidates whom they wished to support, and were thus exposed to pressure from powerful vested interests. These included most obviously their own landlords, who could exact material sanctions, and often their priests, whose influence developed powerfully during the nineteenth century (Whyte, 1960; 1965). Since the Catholic clergy were not usually on the

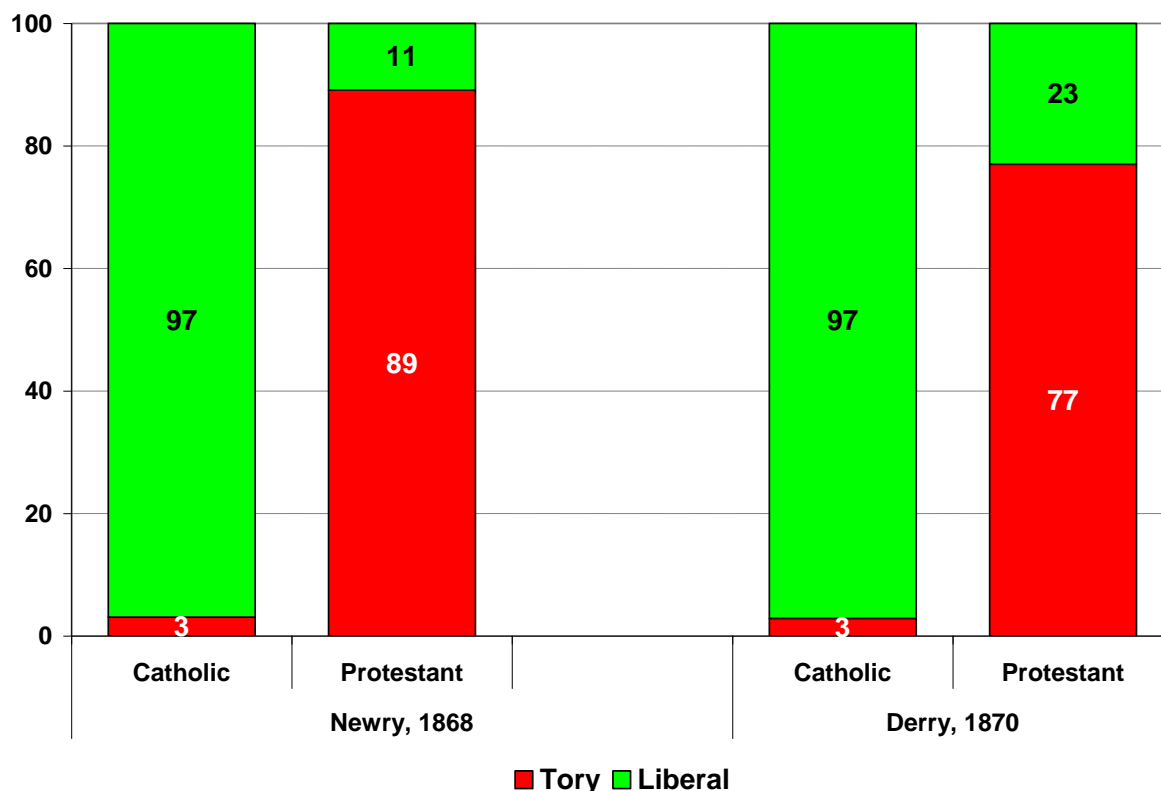
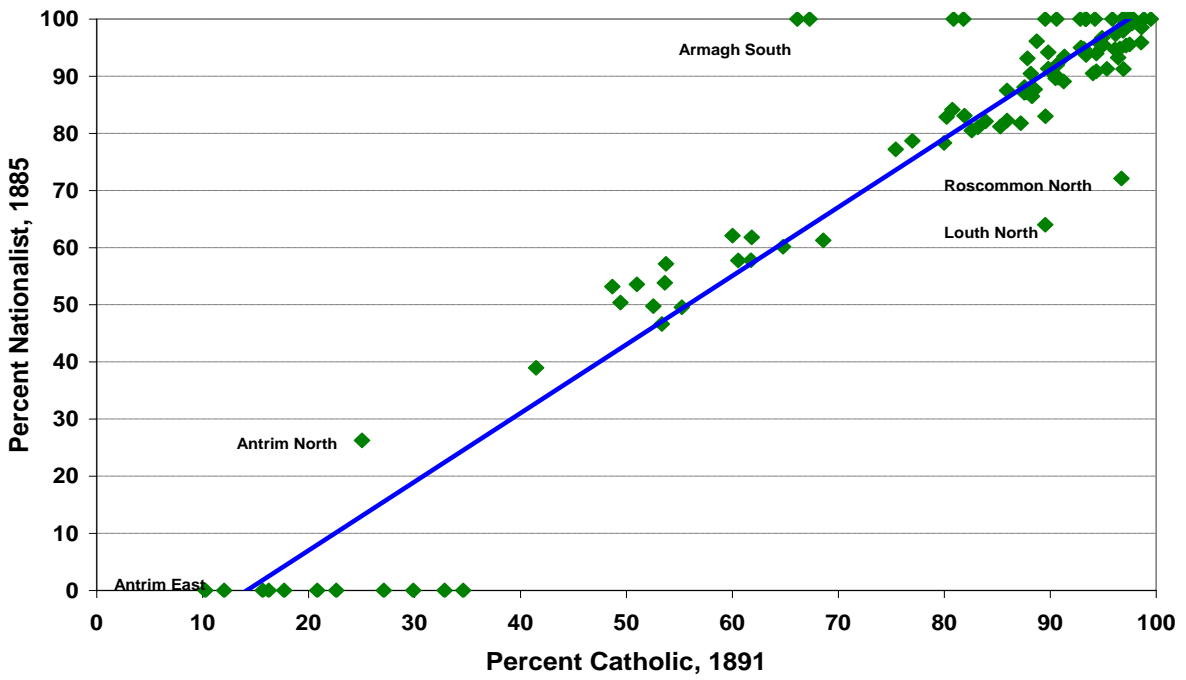


Figure 1. Voters (%) by religion and party, Newry, 1868, and Londonderry, 1870

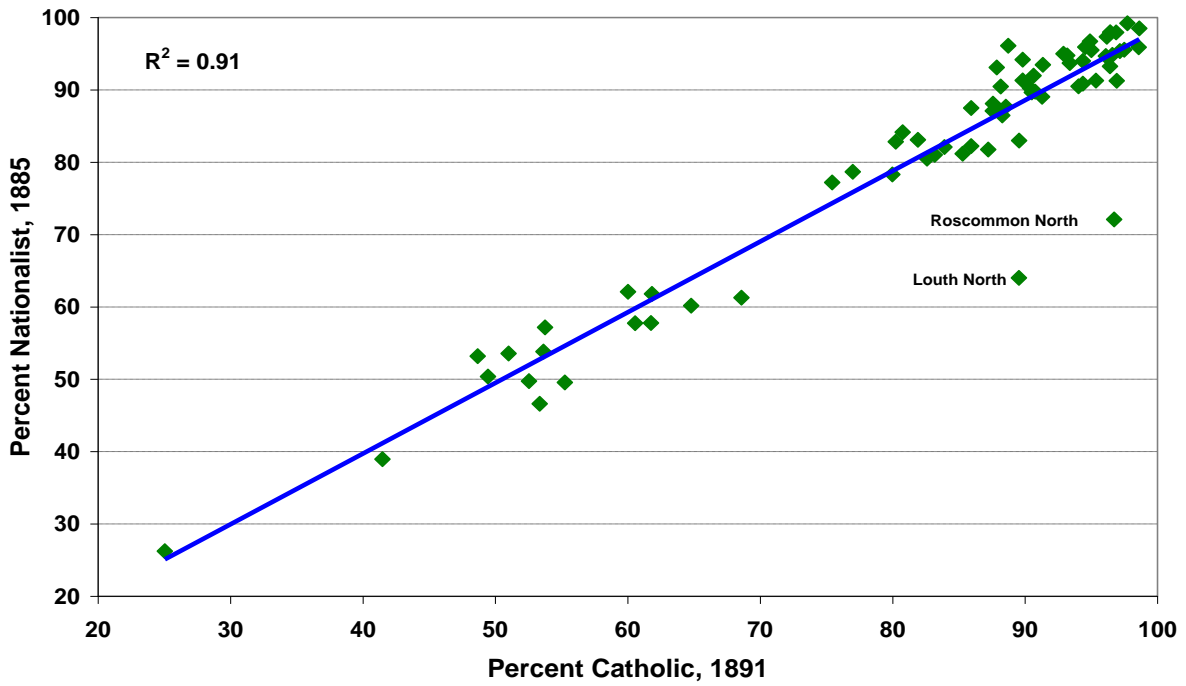
Source: Hoppen, 1984: 38

same side as the large Tory landlords, cross-pressures on voters were potentially considerable. In this context, poll books became an important instrument in the political contest at local level; newspapers opposing Tory interests, for example, could use them to “expose” defectors from the popular cause, bringing significant moral pressure to bear. Analysis of two such poll books by Hoppen (1984: 38) shows the strong relationship between the religious and political division lines, even among the relatively well-off voters to whom the franchise was confined at this time. As figure 1 shows, in the boroughs of Newry during the general election of 1868 and Londonderry during a by-election in 1870, Catholics voted overwhelmingly for the Liberal candidate; conversely, Protestants voted solidly Tory.

This relationship is reflected also in ecological data. During the 12 elections from 1832 to 1880, Tory or Conservative candidates won 82% of all seats in the counties that now constitute Northern Ireland, but only 25% in the remaining counties that now make up the Republic – and these were overwhelmingly concentrated in constituencies with a large Protestant population (Coakley, 2004; 2008).



(a) All constituencies



(b) Contested constituencies

Figure 2. Constituencies by religion and party, Ireland, 1885

But it was only when substantial manhood suffrage was introduced in 1884 that the starkness of Catholic-Protestant political polarisation became crystal clear. The 1885 general election illustrates this. Figure 2 (a) plots the position of each of Ireland's 101 territorial constituencies, as these were defined in 1885, in respect of two dimensions: the percentage of Catholics in the constituency according to the 1891 census, and the percentage of those voting who supported official Nationalist Party candidates (selected constituencies are marked for illustrative purposes). The result is a characteristic Z-shaped curve. The top line of the Z represents constituencies where the Nationalist candidate was unopposed (and has here been allocated 100% electoral support); these were strongly Catholic constituencies. The bottom line represents constituencies where no Nationalist candidate stood (so the party has been allocated 0% electoral support); these were strongly Protestant constituencies. The remaining (contested) constituencies are clustered close to the diagonal arm connecting these lines, and show just how far support for the Nationalist Party reflected the proportion of Catholics in the population.

Figure 2 (b) looks at the same data when uncontested constituencies are removed. The intensity of the relationship may be measured by the correlation coefficient of 0.96 (giving an R-squared value of 0.91, conventionally interpreted as implying that religion explains 91% of the variance in party support in this election). Indeed, if Roscommon North and Louth North (where the contest was an internal nationalist one) were omitted the correlation coefficient would be higher still (0.98; R-squared = 0.97, $p < 0.001$). As Brian Walker summarised the outcome of the election, "the electorate had polarised sharply along denominational lines throughout the country. Protestant nationalists ... and Catholic unionists ... were rare exceptions" (Walker, 1996: 27). Given the stark results of the 1885 general election, Unionists substantially abandoned electoral politics in southern Ireland; intense intercommunal contests were now largely confined to the North.

This pattern was to continue up to the partition of Ireland in 1921 and even afterwards. Figure 3 shows the pattern of constituency representation in what is now Northern Ireland over two periods. Figure 3 (a) distinguishes constituencies with Protestant majorities according to the 1891 census from those with Catholic majorities, and reports the results of eight elections, 1885-1910.²

In nine of the 12 Protestant constituencies only Unionists (including Liberal Unionists) were returned. In three others Unionist success was the norm, but there were short-lived Nationalist successes in two cases, and two Liberals were also returned. In five of the nine Catholic constituencies only Nationalists were returned. Two others were predominantly Nationalist, but in the two remaining constituencies (Fermanagh North and Londonderry Borough) Unionists were more often returned. Sinn Féin's success in the general election of 1918 disrupted the pattern of Nationalist-Unionist dualism, but this eventually resumed in Northern Ireland. Figure 3 (b) maps the representation of Catholic and Protestant constituencies following the re-introduction of single-member constituencies in 1929 up to the last election under these boundaries in 1965. In the 23 predominantly Protestant constituencies, Unionists were returned at every one of the nine elections from 1929 to 1965.³ In seven of the nine predominantly Catholic constituencies only nationalists won (Unionists won in South Down in 1938 and in Mid-Tyrone in 1958). Belfast constituencies have been excluded from this analysis, since electoral loyalties were more fluid on both the Catholic and Protestant sides, with strong challenges, especially in the post-war years, from the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) and independent unionists in Protestant constituencies, and from small nationalist splinter parties in Catholic constituencies.

The 1885 general election thus brought about an electoral map of Northern Ireland that was to survive substantially until 1969 – a level of electoral stability without parallel elsewhere in Europe over this time-span. This was despite the fact that suffrage was not yet universal, and was marked by a bias towards the wealthier (largely unionist) section of the population. From 1918 onwards, of course, politics in southern Ireland began to follow a quite different trajectory, with Sinn Féin's victory in 1918, its splintering in 1922, and the emergence of a new, multi-party system in the same year.

The stark character of electoral polarisation, especially in the northern counties, is vividly illustrated by an electoral contest that briefly attracted national attention to a little known district electoral division in County Tyrone (district electoral divisions were used for the return of rural district councillors and "guardians" of the local workhouses responsible for administering assistance to the poor). In the run-up to the local elections of 1914 – which were to turn out to be particularly important, as the last such elections before 1920 – Unionists were known to have a majority of three on the electoral register in Killyfaddy

district electoral division (an area north of Clogher), though the division itself was 52.3% Catholic. The death of one Protestant in early 1914 reduced this precarious lead further, so the results of the election were eagerly awaited. In the event, the two Unionist candidates won the seats: each elector had two votes, and the two Unionists won 92 and 89 votes, to the Nationalists' 87 and 84. The significance of the result derived from the knife-edge outcomes elsewhere in the county. Victory in Killyfaddy gave Unionists a bare majority on Clogher Rural District Council, allowing them to choose the chairman. The chairman was ex-officio a member of Tyrone County Council, which was evenly balanced between Nationalists and Unionists. This was sufficient to tip Tyrone County Council into Unionist hands (though the county was 55.4% Catholic in 1911).⁴ This political outcome – Unionist control of County Tyrone – was symbolically and substantively important to Unionists in circumstances where partition was shortly to become so central an issue; but it also illustrates the strength of the relationship between religious affiliation and electoral loyalty.

Party support is not, of course, the same as public opinion: voters may opt for parties whose policies they do not share, as is well known from the comparative analysis of electoral behaviour. The pre-1921 Nationalist Party was not a separatist one, not could it have been described as “anti-Union”: it stood formally for “home rule” within the United Kingdom, even if many of its prominent activists, especially in the late nineteenth century, were members of or close to the Irish Republican Brotherhood. But the geopolitical change marked by partition redefined the context, requiring policy reformulation, and the Nationalist Party, which was obliterated in the South but survived in Northern Ireland, ceased being a party calling for “home rule” and instead became one advocating Irish unity – which now meant breaking with Britain and joining an independent Irish state.

In this changed context, such evidence as we have from the 1920s suggests that religion, party affiliation and position on the constitutional question coincided: with few exceptions, Catholics voted for the Nationalist Party in Northern Ireland and supported Irish unity; Protestants voted for the Unionist Party and supported the union. It is true that there had always been a few exceptions to this stark dichotomy: there were some Catholic unionists (among the landed gentry, for instance, among business elites and among civil servants), and there were not a few prominent Protestant nationalists (as in much of central and eastern Europe, the early leadership of the nationalist movement commonly drew on “defectors”

from the dominant minority group).⁵ Nevertheless, the boundary commission in 1925, charged with responsibility for redefining the line of the Irish border, and having considered well over 100 written submissions (some of them multi-volume ones) and a great deal of oral evidence, took the view that there was no need for a plebiscite to establish people's wishes: these could be inferred from their religious affiliation, as measured by the 1911 census. As the commission put it,

in the areas concerned religious and political divisions to-day, broadly speaking, correspond; and ... in such areas, subject in each case to comparatively few exceptions, if the question could be put to the vote, members of Protestant denominations would vote in favour of being in Northern Ireland, and Roman Catholics would vote in favour of being in the Irish Free State. These assumptions appear to be almost universally accepted (Irish Boundary Commission, 1969 [1925]: 69)

As in other cases where a new state border was superimposed on the political map, though, it seems that a toll was taken on the political consciousness of those who found themselves subject to a new political order. Almost five decades after partition, Richard Rose's remarkable 1968 survey offers a pen-picture of Catholic and Protestant attitudes just months before the outbreak of civil unrest.⁶ The survey showed the extent to which Protestants still supported the Ulster Unionist Party, though with many now switching to the NILP. Catholics largely supported the Nationalist Party, but with a substantial bloc now also supporting the NILP, and a small number even supported the Unionist Party. The survey also reported substantial Catholic acceptance of the constitutional status quo, though Catholics diverged significantly from Protestants in respect of this: their support for the union rested on instrumental considerations (such as "it usually provides lots of benefits for people") rather than on symbolic ones (such as "it gives us a Queen to rule over us"; Rose, 1971: 244).

The contrasting responses of Catholic and Protestants in attitudes towards Northern Ireland's constitutional status in 1968 are reported in figure 4, which also seeks to track intergenerational change in this respect. On the Protestant side, rock-solid support for the status quo extended across the generations, with little difference between the younger (under 35), middle-aged (35-54) and older (55 and more) groups. On the Catholic side, however, there were significant inter-generational differences, with those in the older group much more likely to support the Northern Ireland constitution (54%) than those in the younger group (43%).

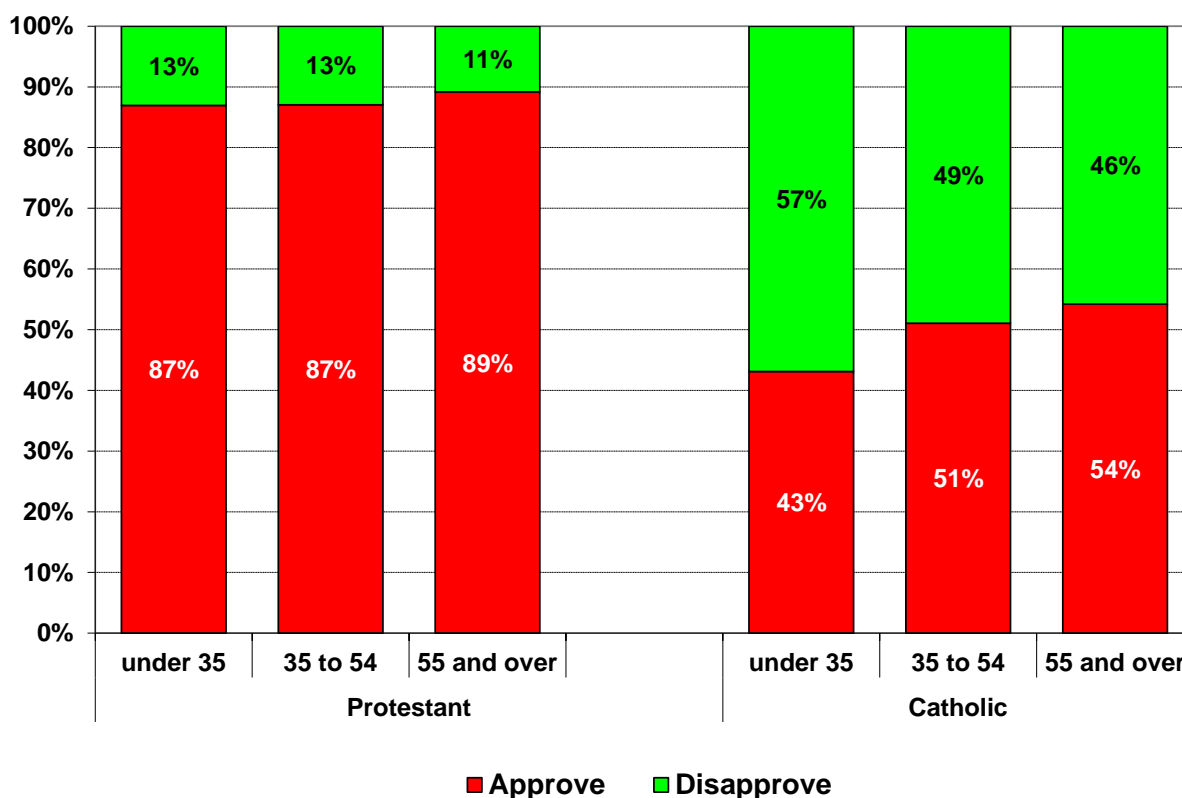


Figure 4. Attitudes towards the constitution by religion and age group, Northern Ireland, 1968

Source: derived from Northern Ireland Loyalty Survey, 1968 (see note 1)

This, however, should not be seen as necessarily representing an upsurge in Irish nationalism among the younger generation. Dissatisfaction with the existing order seems not to have been incompatible with a weakened sense of Irish identity among younger Catholics, as figure 5 shows: 82% of the older generation felt “Irish” as opposed to 71% of the younger generation (of whom 18% felt “British”). Interestingly, identification with traditional national labels appeared to be loosening also among Protestants: 17% of the older generation but 26% of the younger generation accepted the designation “Irish”, rather than “British” or “Ulster”. After a long period of apparent stability, then, it appears that the traditional certainties about the link between religious affiliation and political perspective were being challenged, though in many cases selection of British identity may have been seen as “a consequence of constitutional arguments” rather than representing a statement about personal upbringing (Rose, 1971: 209). At the same time, though, another long-standing reality was changing: the traditional demographic dominance of the Protestant denominations was being undermined, the topic to which this paper now turns.

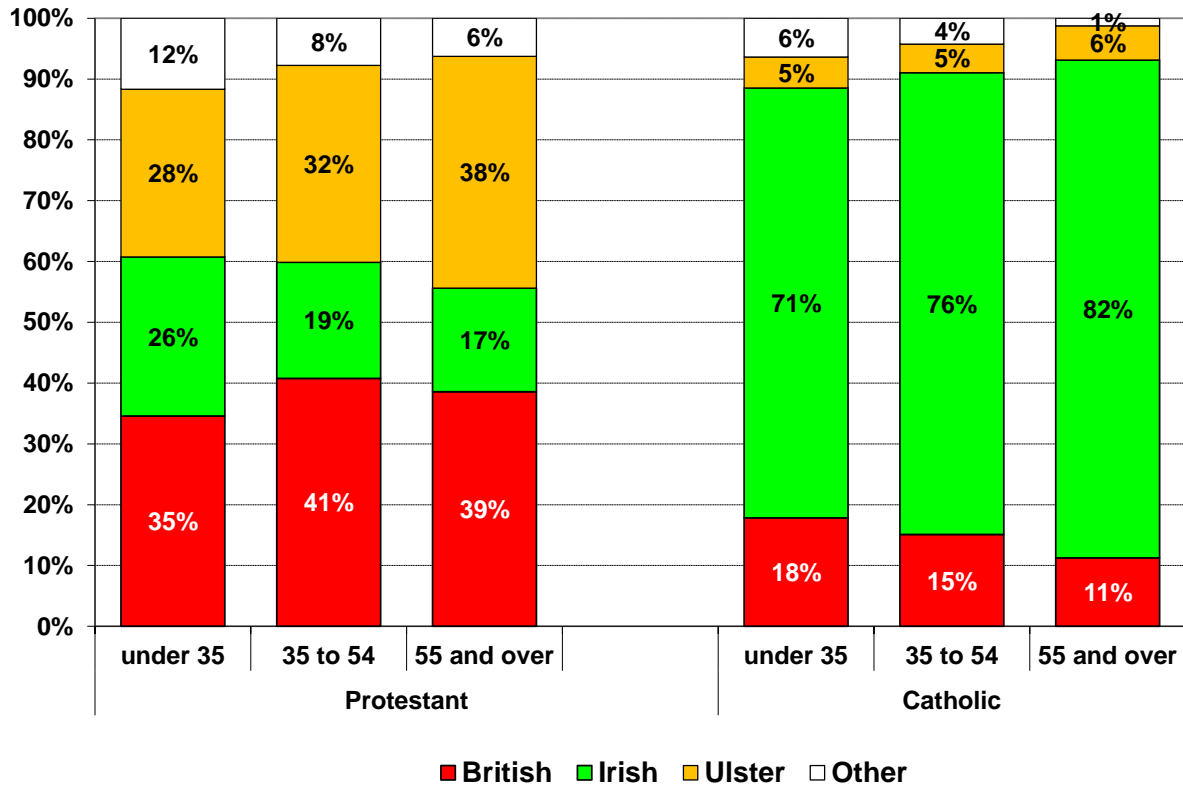


Figure 5. National identity by religion and age group, Northern Ireland, 1968

Source: derived from Northern Ireland Loyalty Survey, 1968 (see note 1)

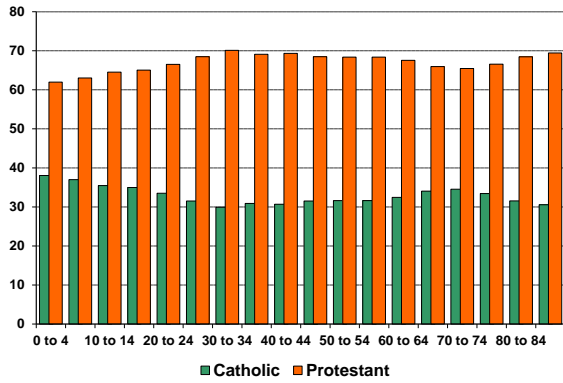
Demographic change and its consequences

Given the centrality of demographic considerations for the shaping of the new state of Northern Ireland, it is not surprising that political leaders paid careful attention to the results of the decennial census of population. The 1911 census, used as a basis for the partition settlement, showed that the population of the province of Ulster was 43.7% Catholic (a minority that was perilously large), while drawing the border to include only administrative counties with a Protestant majority would have produced a “Northern Ireland” with a smaller Catholic minority (29.2%), but also with a much smaller land area (it would not have included County Fermanagh, County Tyrone or Londonderry County Borough; Coakley, 2002: 9). In the area that was finally selected, the proportion of Catholics in 1911 was 34.4%, a level to which it had been dropping steadily, from 40.9% in 1861. There were no reasons to doubt that demographic stability would prevail, in line with the fertility patterns implied by the 1911 census of Ireland. Analysis of the census results shows that while the proportion of all Protestants aged under nine on the island of Ireland (17.7%) was slightly less than the

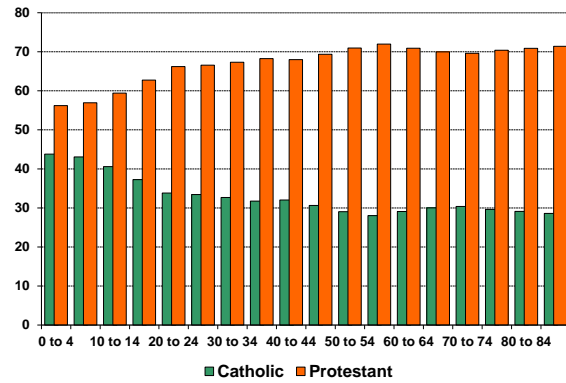
corresponding figure for Catholics (18.1%), these figures were reversed in Ulster, where those under nine accounted for 18.6% of all Protestants, but only 18.0% of Catholics. In the six counties that were to become Northern Ireland the respective proportions were 18.7% and 18.1%.⁷

As is well known, though, this pattern was not to last, and changing demographic patterns became a source of continuing worry to Unionist leaders. The Catholic fertility rate, and the overall rate of natural increase of the Catholic population (the excess of births over deaths), climbed quickly above the corresponding Protestant rate. By 1937, the Catholic rate of natural increase was more than double that of Protestants; by 1975 it was five times greater (computed from Compton, 1982: 88). Looked at differently, in 1937 the under-10s accounted for 16.6% of the Protestant population, but for 19.8% of Catholics (computed from Northern Ireland, 1940: 10-12). By 1961 the gap had widened massively, with corresponding figures of 17.0% for Protestants and 24.4% for Catholics (computed from Northern Ireland, 1965b: 20-23). Although the census did not make the statistic obvious, it may be computed that at the time mean Catholic family size was 4.7 children, while mean Protestant family size was 2.9.⁸ By 1971, mean family size for Catholic women after 20 years of marriage was 5.3, much higher than the corresponding Protestant mean of 3.0 children; this seems to have arisen from a change in Catholic marriage patterns, as the tendency to marry relatively late in a life was replaced by a norm of marriage at a younger age (Compton, 1982: 94). By 2011, Catholics aged under 10 accounted for 14.2% of all Catholics; the corresponding figure for Protestants was 10.3% (Northern Ireland, 2014b: table DC2254NI).

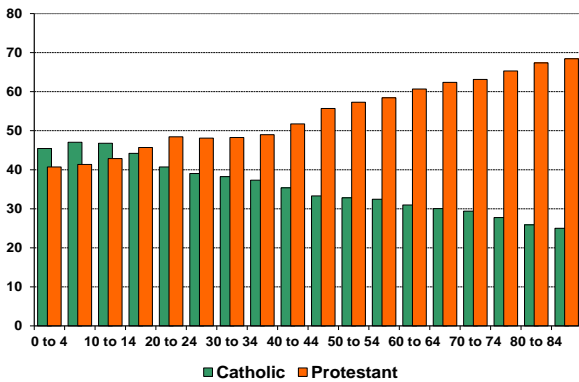
The age structure of the population at selected points in time (1937, 1961, 1991 and 2011) is illustrated in figure 6. The 1937 pattern no doubt resembles that in earlier decades (crosstabulations of age by religion were not reported earlier, presumably because no unusual pattern was visible), though with a notable increase in the proportion of Catholics in the younger age cohorts. This tendency is more pronounced in 1961, when 44% of the under-fives were Catholic, at a time when Catholics amounted to 35% of the total population. The censuses of 1971, 1981 and 1991 are less easy to analyse because of the large proportion refusing to give information on religion, and a serious problem of under-enumeration of Catholics in 1981. Subject to these caveats, the 1991 data illustrate the extent to which the Catholic proportion was increasing among the younger age cohorts (the



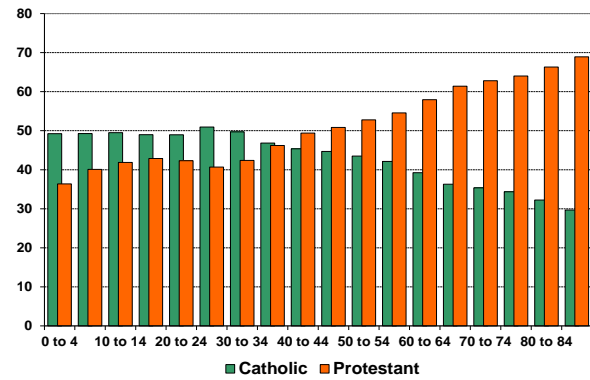
(a) 1937



(b) 1961



(c) 1991



(d) 2011

Figure 6. Religion by five-year age cohorts, Northern Ireland, 1937-2011

Note: The last category refers to those aged 85 or more. “Protestant” includes all other denominations in 1937 and 1961, and all other denominations in 1991. In 1991, a large number refused to state their religion, or indicated that they had none. In 2011 the labels refer to those of Catholic and Protestant background respectively.

Source: computed from Northern Ireland, 1940: 10-12; 1965b: 20-23; 1993: 3-6; 2014, table DC2254NI

patterns for the two groups are not symmetrical; a new third group falling outside the two reported denominational blocs has been omitted). For 2001 and 2011, a new methodology was adopted in the census. Those refusing to answer the question on religion, or reporting themselves as not belonging to any particular religion, were invited to indicate the religion in which they had been brought up, and these answers were grouped with those on religious affiliation to divide the population by “community background”.⁹ The population breakdown by community background and age for 2011 is indicated in figure 6 (d), which shows Catholics outnumbering Protestants in all age cohorts below 40.

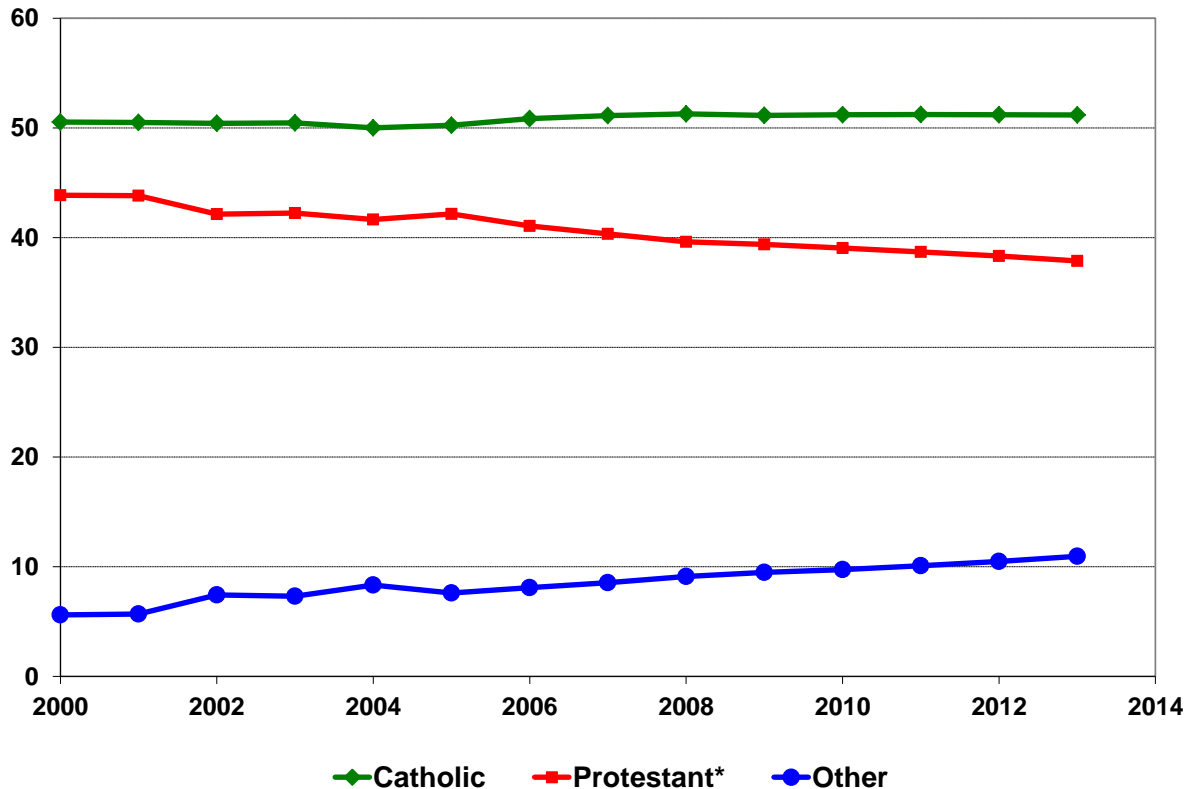
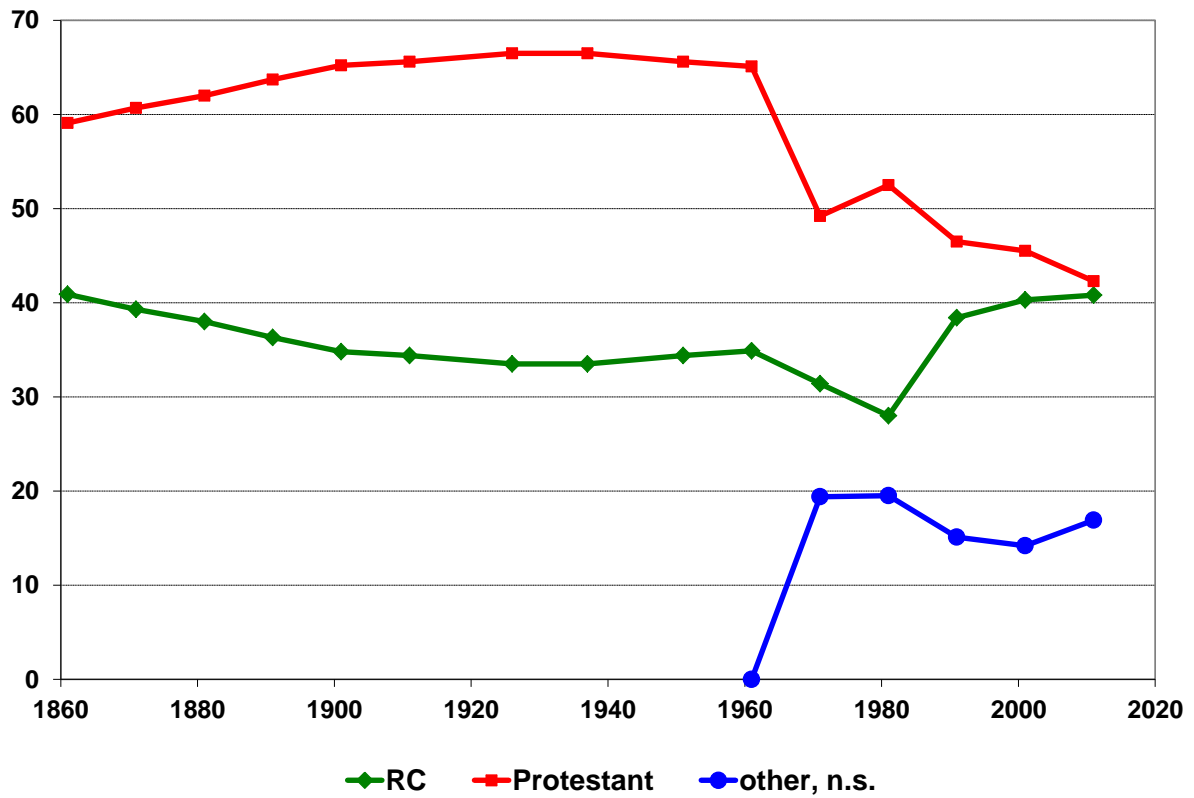


Figure 7. Primary school pupils by religion, school years 2000-01 to 2013-14

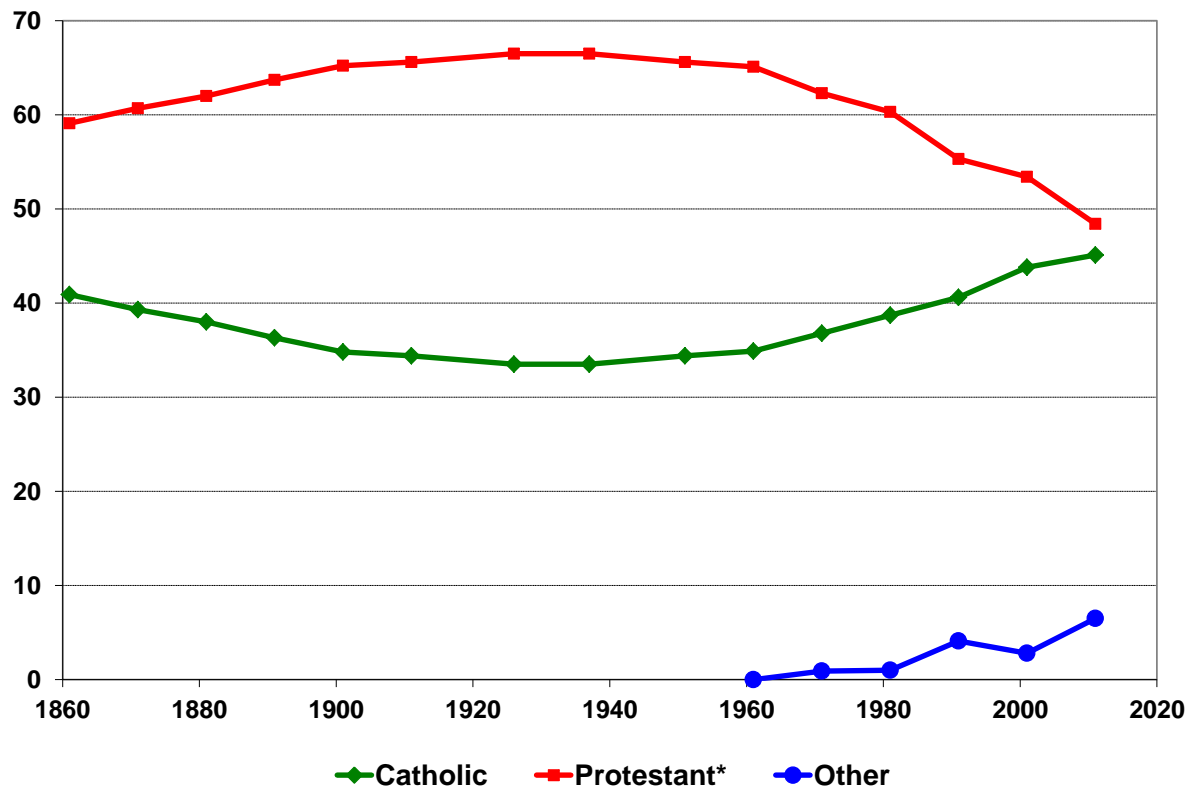
Source: Northern Ireland, 2014a.

This pattern by which Catholics outnumbered Protestants in the lower age groups seems set to continue. Figure 7 uses data on primary school enrolments in the early twenty-first century (from school year 2000-01 to 2013-14) to plot the positions of the major denominations. Catholics recorded a slight majority over this period, hovering around 51%; the proportion of reported Protestant (including other Christian) primary school children fell from 44% to 38%, while “others” increased from 6% to 11%. It is probable that many of those in the “other” category were of Protestant background; they are concentrated overwhelmingly in the “controlled” (generally Protestant-managed) school sector.

Of course, it is well known that the higher Catholic rate of natural increase was offset by the fact that the Catholic emigration rate was for long much higher than the Protestant rate. It has been estimated that over the intercensal period 1937-51 Catholics accounted for 58% of all emigrants, and that the corresponding figure was about 60% in 1951-61 and 65% in 1961-71, before falling back to about 60% in the period 1971-78 (Compton, 1982: 91, 93). This was



(a) Religious denomination



(b) Community background

Figure 8. Population by religious group, Northern Ireland, 1861-2011

Source: Northern Ireland, 1993: 1; Jardine, 1994; Northern Ireland, 2014: table KS211NI

still well above the Catholic share of the population; but many commentators were of the view that by the last decades of the twentieth century Protestant emigration had increased significantly, especially in respect of the university-age population. While there is no direct statistical evidence to support the view that young Protestants are more likely to leave for university in Great Britain than are Catholics, and that they are less likely to return subsequently to work in Northern Ireland, census data are not incompatible with this. In 2011, for instance, Catholics accounted for 49% of the 16-24 age group (and Protestants for 43%); but Catholics accounted for a disproportionate 51% of students (and Protestants for 41%; computed from Northern Ireland, 2014b: table DC2617).

The overall implications of these developments for the demographic relationship between the two communities in Northern Ireland are summarised in figure 8. The top part of this figure reports raw religious affiliation as recorded at successive censuses. The sharp decline in the proportion of Protestants and especially of Catholics in 1971 is easily explained by the upsurge in the number of “others” and of those not indicating their religion, a trend that was to continue. For this reason, the bottom part of the figure seeks to provide a more reliable assessment of the relative size of the two communities. Up to 1961, the raw figures may be regarded as offering a reasonable indicator of community background. From 1971 to 1991 estimates arrived at by demographers have been used; and in 2001 and 2011 the new methodology designed to measure community background has been used. This profile thus shows a steady convergence of the Catholic and Protestant populations, indicating that the former will soon overtake the latter.

One trend in figure 8 is worth exploring further: the rise in the “other” share of the population (7% in 2011), a group whose importance was recognised even before it was defined in this way (Doherty and Poole, 2002). Since this group holds the balance between Catholics and Protestants, it is important to try to assess its composition. If, as in the past, this group were made up of refugees from the “Catholic” and “Protestant” categories, such as lapsed members of the major denominations, we might expect the draw of ethnonational loyalties still to be strong. But if this group were made up mainly of “outsiders”, attitudes towards the constitutional question might be more flexible. In 2011, though, it is clear that this group comprised mainly persons born in Northern Ireland (70%), with those born in Great Britain accounting for 13%, and the balance (17%) born outside the UK. The great

majority of those born outside Northern Ireland (amounting to 11% of the population in 2011) in fact identify with one or other of the two major religious blocs. It is likely that the “bloc loyalty” of this substantial population (who account for 12% of Catholics and 8% of Protestants) will be a good deal weaker than that of the native-born population, and, perhaps, that it will have a bigger impact in the longer term than the small, non-religious foreign-born population. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to underestimate the probable impact of future immigration patterns, unpredictable though they currently may be.

Public opinion change

Given the extent to which Northern Ireland was born as an entity where careful computation of the proportions of Catholics and Protestants was of central concern, it is not surprising that politicians and commentators alike have remained profoundly focused on matters of sectarian demography, and that this has resulted in simplistic political analysis, with naive assumptions about one community “overtaking” the other, and sensationalist media reporting, with the depiction of stark consequences in a demographic “race” (McEldowney, Anderson and Shuttleworth, 2011). In reality, it is clear that public opinion had ceased to conform to traditional stereotypes as early as 1968, when the first survey evidence showed that the stark polarisation of earlier decades seemed to have softened. Almost half a century later, to what extent has public opinion evolved further? Attitudinal shift may be considered at three levels: identity (normally seen as a relatively deep-rooted human characteristic that changes only slowly, and which may be further subdivided into communal identification and national identity), party support (also generally seen as a relatively stable feature of individual attitudes), and constitutional preference (a specific matter on which we would expect basic attitudes to be enduring, but which is likely to be highly sensitive to sharp changes of political context).

For the past 25 year or so, Northern Ireland surveys have regularly asked a question inviting respondents to indicate the community with which they would identify (“generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a unionist, a nationalist or neither?”). Answers over time show relatively little variation, as may be seen in figure 9, which reports responses at selected years since 1989. Protestants identify strongly as unionist (about 60-70%), with the remainder opting for “neither”; Catholics identify less strongly as nationalist (about 40-60%),

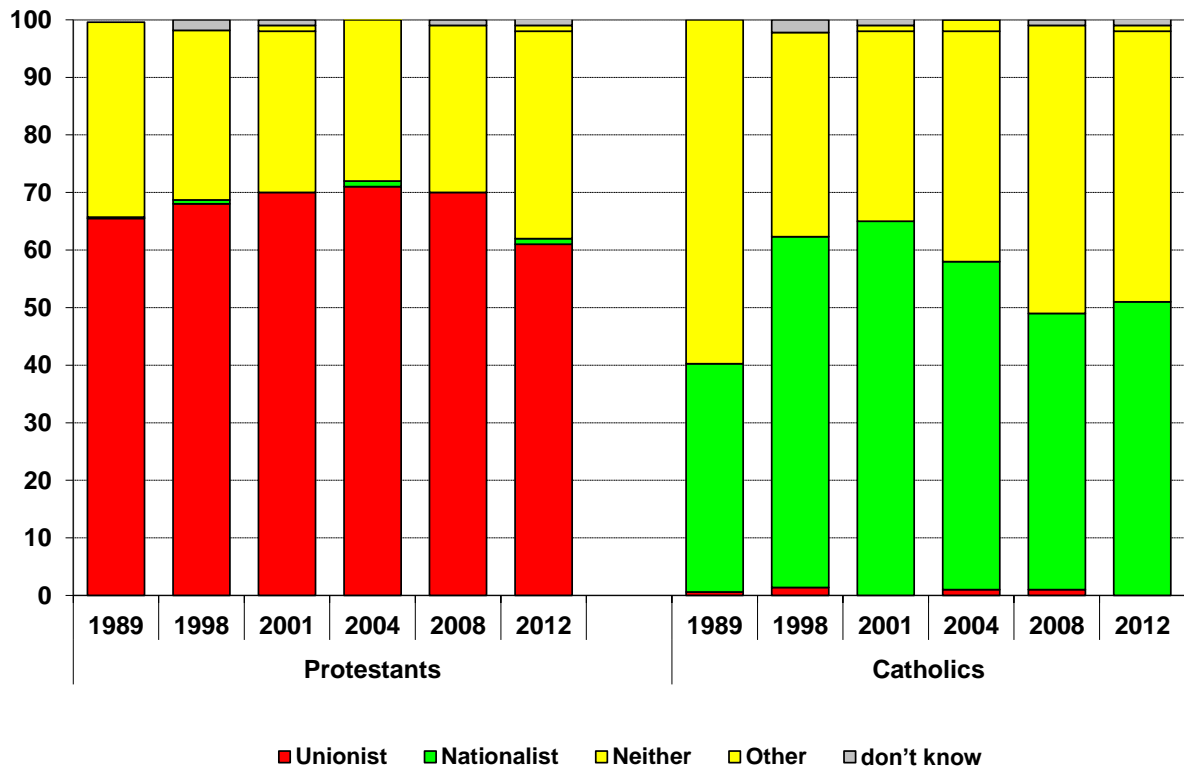


Figure 9. Communal identification by religion, Northern Ireland, selected years, 1989-2012

Source: Derived from Northern Ireland Social Attitudes surveys and Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys; see note 1.

with a large proportion identifying as “neither”. Strikingly, virtually no Protestants identify as nationalist. This is mirrored on the Catholic side, where virtually no-one identifies as unionist – even if, as will be seen below, many “non-unionist” Catholics support the union. This binary labelling system is clearly seen by respondents as referring to communal identification, not necessarily to constitutional perspective.

National identity is assessed more explicitly in a question that dates back to 1968. In that year, Rose’s survey asked “which of these terms best describes the way you usually think of yourself?”, with options British, Irish, Ulster, sometimes British-sometimes Irish, and Anglo-Irish. By 2012 this question was still similarly phrased: “which of these best describes the way you think of yourself?”, with a new option dating from 1989 (Northern Irish), but dropping two of the earlier options (sometimes British-sometimes Irish, and Anglo-Irish). Figure 10 reports the results at selected points in time. Most Protestants (except in the 1968 survey) described themselves as British, and most Catholics described themselves as Irish, but three other interrelated developments are worth noting. First, Protestant self-

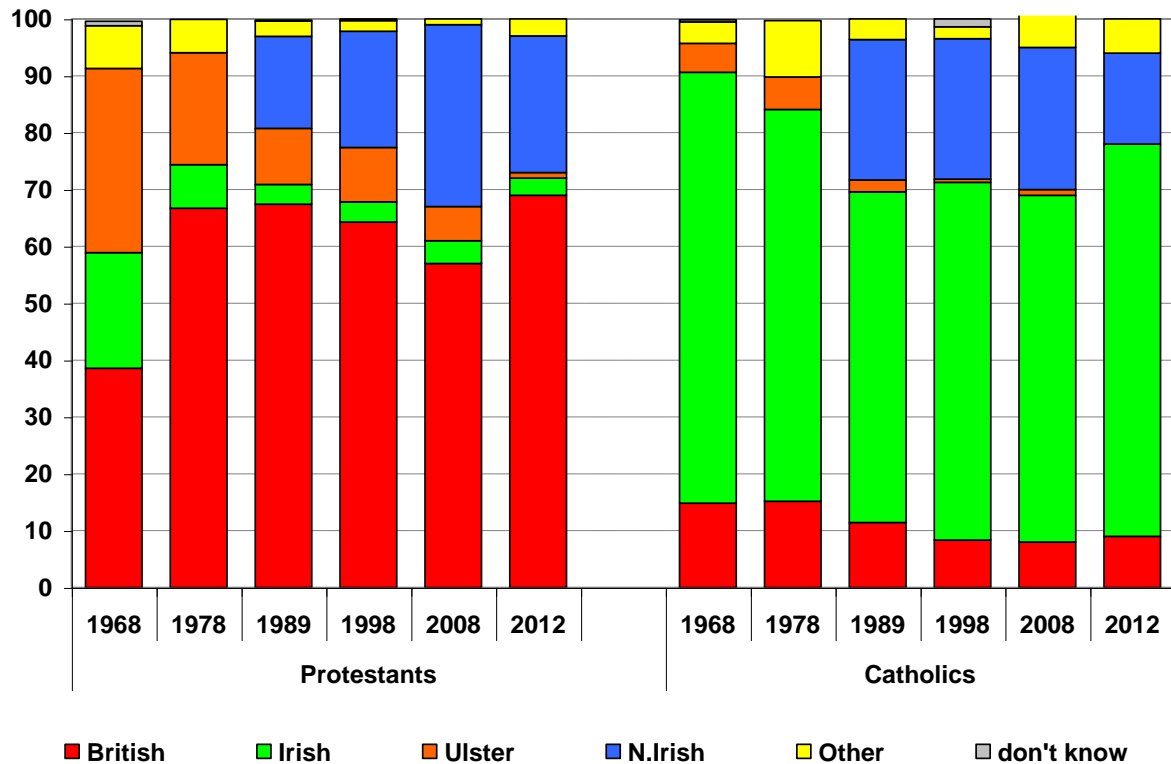


Figure 10. National identity by religion, Northern Ireland, selected years, 1968-2012

Source: Derived from Northern Ireland Loyalty Survey, 1968; Northern Ireland Attitudes survey, 1978; Northern Ireland Social Attitudes surveys and Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys (see note 1).

description as Irish dropped sharply after 1968 (when 20% opted for this category), and especially after 1978. Second, Protestants tended to define their identity much more strongly as British after 1968, at the apparent expense of the Irish and Ulster categories – paradoxically, given the gulf between Protestant political preferences and British policies that had opened up in the 1970s (Moxon-Browne, 1983: 6). Third, when the Northern Irish option was introduced in 1989 it was adopted by significant proportions of both Catholics and Protestants. Although we do not know whether this label means the same thing to Catholics as to Protestants, it seems to imply a refocusing of identity on the territory of Northern Ireland for a significant section of the population.

While many Protestants may opt for an identity other than British and fail to accept the designation unionist, however, they still vote either for unionist parties or for parties of the centre, with virtually none supporting nationalist parties, as figure 11 shows. This pattern of communal political loyalty seems to have been shared on the Catholic side, where most respondents supported nationalist parties or parties of the centre, with virtually none

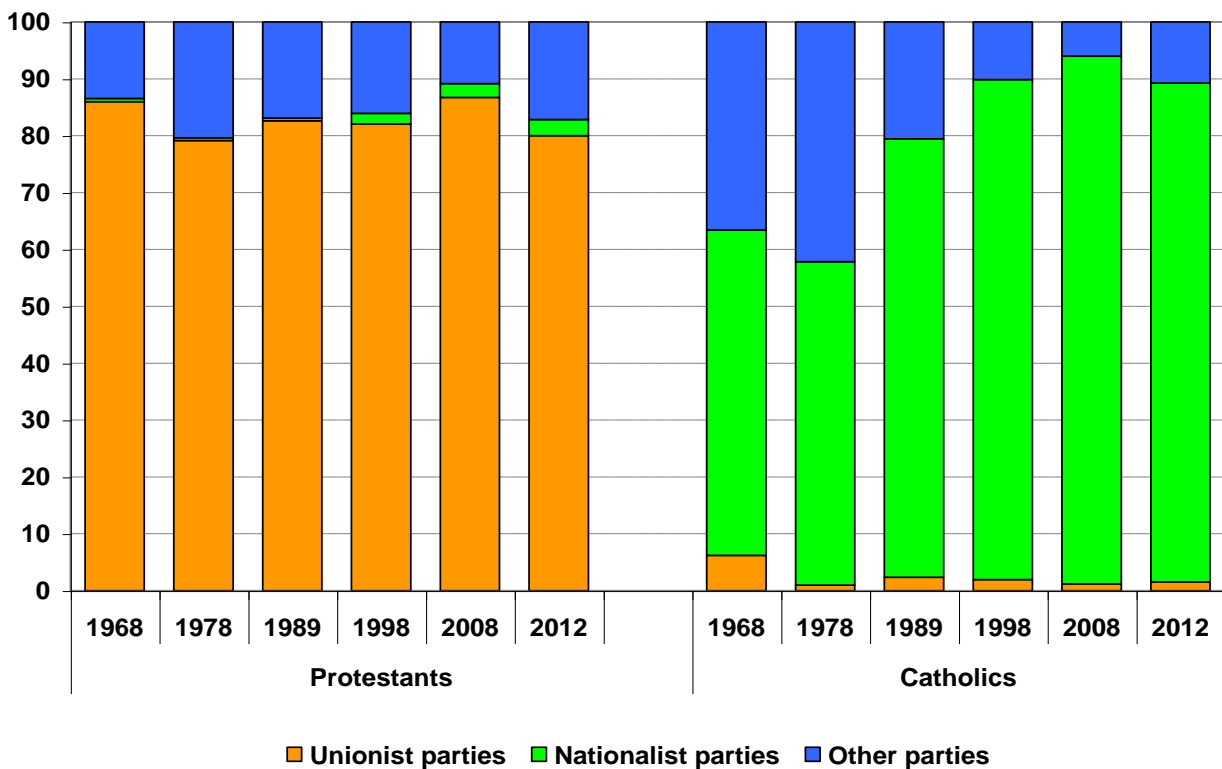


Figure 11. Party support by religion, Northern Ireland, selected years, 1968-2012

Source: As for figure 10.

supporting unionist parties (though in 1968 and 1978 Catholic support for the centre was very strong, and in 1968 a significant proportion of Catholics supported the Unionist Party).

Ultimately, though, this paper is concerned with the extent to which perspectives on a specific and highly contentious policy question – the constitutional status of Northern Ireland – may have changed. As indicated above, there were signs in 1968 that traditional political attitudes were softening, particularly on the Catholic side. Figure 12 contrasts the characteristic attitudes of the two communities on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. The 1968 data do not bear directly on this question, but have been adapted to approximate it (the question was “there has been a lot of controversy about the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. On balance, do you approve or disapprove of it?”). It is clear that there was substantial Catholic support for the constitutional status quo, and that this continued, if at a lower level, in later surveys.

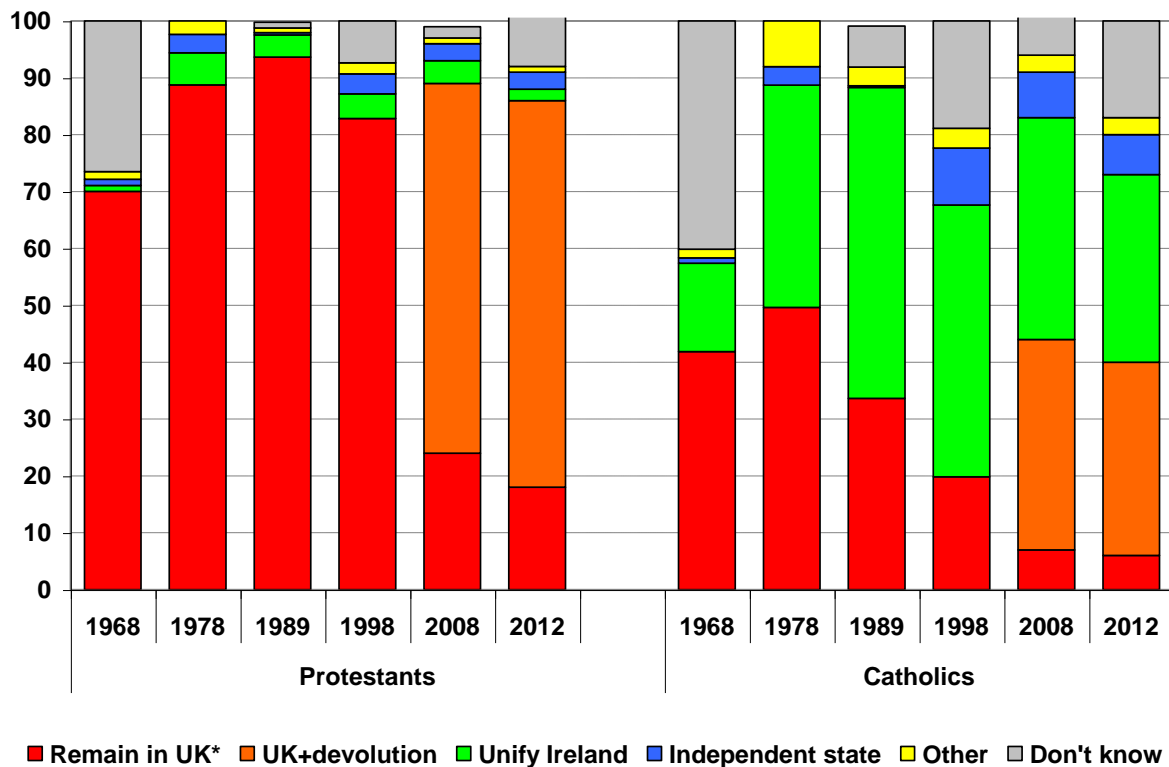
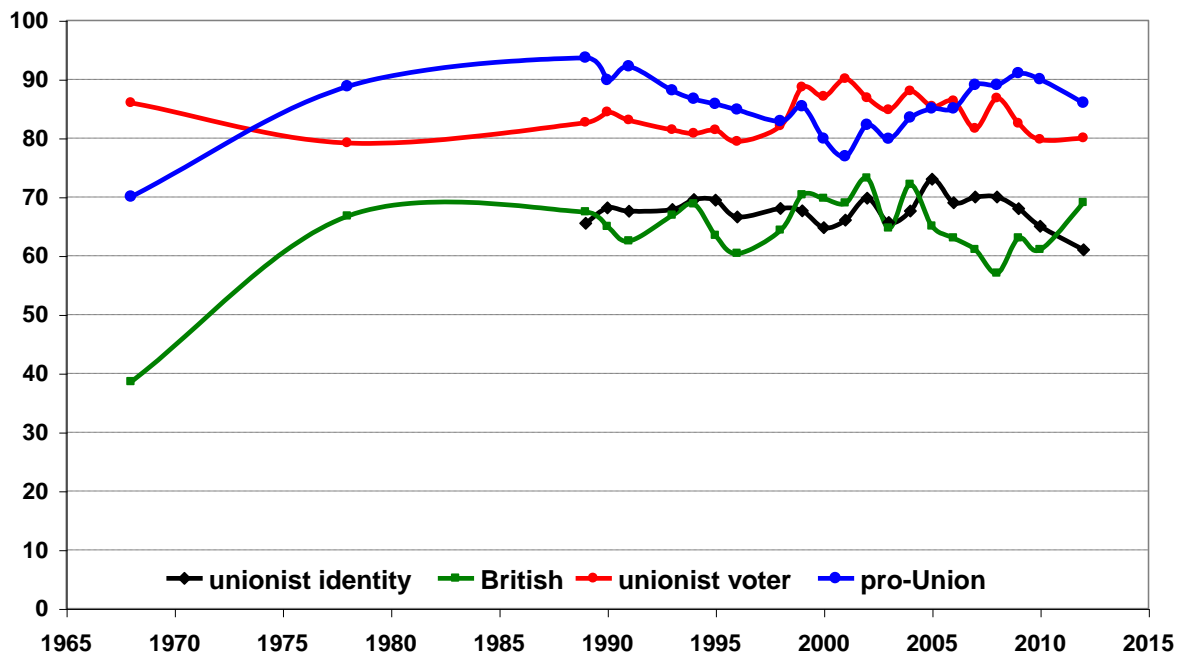


Figure 12. Constitutional preference by religion, Northern Ireland, selected years, 1968-2012

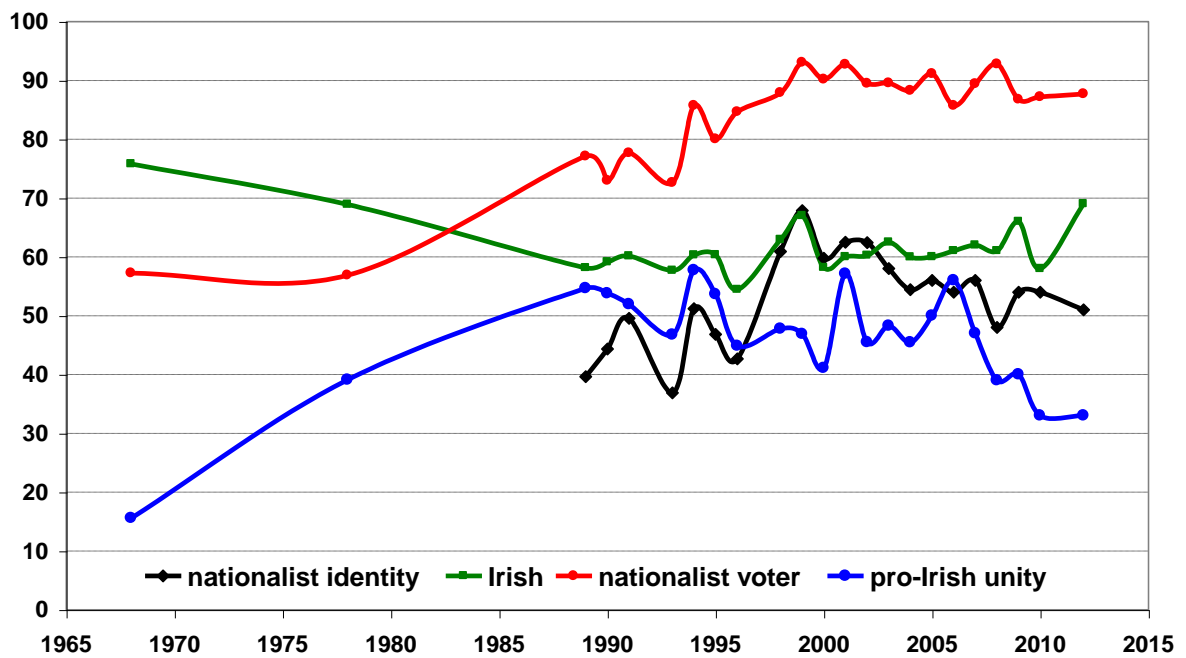
Source: As for figure 10.

In fact, from 2008 onwards Catholic supporters of the union began to outnumber Catholic supporters of Irish unity, though this was in part an artefact of changed question wording (from 2007 onwards, two pro-union options were offered: a direct rule variant, or a devolved government variant). These divided political preferences on the Catholic side contrast with the much more substantial consensus on the Protestant side, stable over time, in favour of the union.

As emerges from this discussion, there have been some striking asymmetries between Catholic and Protestant political attitudes and identities. These are summarised in figure 13, which records positions taken by Catholic and Protestant respondents at surveys since 1968 in the four areas discussed about and illustrated in figures 9-12. The top part of the figure (representing Protestant views) contrasts visually with the bottom part (representing Catholic views): the stereotypical Protestant attitudes are a good deal more strongly held than the stereotypical Catholics ones (they are clustered towards the top of the graph area).



(a) Protestants



(b) Catholics

Figure 13. Selected attitudes by religion, Northern Ireland, 1968-2012

Source: As for figure 10.

The position of Protestants conforms relatively closely to traditional stereotypes: Protestants tend to identify overwhelmingly as unionist (or as neither unionist nor nationalist; but never as nationalist), as British (or as Ulster or Northern Irish; but rarely as Irish), and as supporters of unionist parties (or of parties of the centre; but almost never of nationalist parties); and they overwhelmingly support the union (with only a tiny portion endorsing Irish unity). These attitudes are not reciprocated on the Catholic side. Catholics identify as nationalists, but not as strongly as Protestants do as unionists; they see themselves predominantly as Irish, but a sizeable proportion opt for British identity; and they overwhelmingly support nationalist parties (in this respect alone mirroring Protestant patterns of party support). But their attitudes towards the constitutional question show the starkest contrast between the solidity of the two sides: in recent surveys, pro-union Catholics have outnumbered those favouring Irish unity.

Of course, simple responses by survey participants do not tell the full story. To start with, we need to have some idea of the intensity with which the reported views are held. Survey data have some capacity to illuminate the matter further. Indeed, the image of the law-abiding Protestant and the rebel Catholic seems to dissipate when it comes to constitutional matters. In 1968, 82% of Protestants agreed that “it was right about 50 years ago for people in the North to take up arms and stand ready to fight to keep Northern Ireland British”, with only 6% disagreeing; but only 60% of Catholics thought “it was right, about 50 years ago, for people in the South to take up arms and fight in order to make the Republic”, with 21% disagreeing. These attitudes had contemporary resonance: at the same time, most Protestants agreed that “it would be right to take any measures necessary in order to keep Northern Ireland a Protestant country” (52%; 45% disagreed), but few Catholics agreed that “it would be right to take any measures necessary in order to end partition and bring Ulster into the Republic” (13% agreed; 83% disagreed; Rose, 1971: 480-83).

While endorsement of violence to defend the status quo is not directly comparable with endorsement of violence to end it, this does give an indication of intensity of commitment to particular constitutional formulas. It is striking that recent surveys have shown a stronger disposition among Protestants to resist Irish unity than among Catholics to resist the union. In 2012, for example, 25% of pro-union Protestants said that they would find a popular vote in favour of Irish unity “almost impossible to accept”, but only 3% of pro-unity Catholics

would find the permanent failure of such a vote “almost impossible to accept” – a set of contrasting attitudes that have remained consistent since this question was first asked in 1998.¹⁰

There is a second important respect in which the value of survey data is limited. It can at most paint a broad, simple picture (Whyte, 1990: 173-4). The fuller meaning and significance of particular responses is likely to remain elusive unless we supplement survey data with qualitative research. For example, Todd (forthcoming) uses a large volume of in-depth interview material to bring out the complexity and multi-faceted character of identity, and its dependence on political and geopolitical context. One aspect of this complexity is the manner in which isolated communities, such as Northern Ireland’s “border Protestants”, have sought to construct their identity by reference to local intercommunal conflict (Donnan, 2005). Paradoxically, such communities seem to have reacted to the post-1998 settlement with heightened levels of anxiety in respect of their identity (Donnan, 2010) – a subtle and important development which it would be difficult if not impossible to trace using survey data alone.

Conclusion

Census classifications, plebiscite outcomes and political decisions, though, rarely, if ever, allow space for qualitative variation, or acknowledge that citizens’ reactions to policy questions are normally arrayed along a continuum rather than being dichotomised into negative and positive responses. Binary choice was a feature of the “border poll” of 1973, in which 99% of voters (apparently including a number of Catholics) opted to retain the union, and it is the implicit mechanism in respect of any future plebiscite.¹¹ But in view of the developments discussed above (demographic convergence between the two communities, erosion of certain traditional communal markers, and collapse in Catholic support for Irish unity), what does the future hold for the constitutional status of Northern Ireland?

In answering this question, the first and most obvious point to make is that the apparently central role of Northern Irish public opinion in determining the constitutional future of Northern Ireland referred to in the introduction to this paper is no more than that – it is apparent, or even illusory. Already in the 1960s the leader of Northern Ireland’s Nationalist

Party, Eddie McAteer, had felt a cold breeze from Dublin when he sought representation for his party at the presidential inauguration of 1966; he concluded that

There was no real comprehension in the south of the difficulties and aspirations of Northern nationalists. Nearly half a century of partition had eroded the sense of unity of the Irish people, and the south had effectively dismissed Northern nationalists from its thinking (Curran, 1986: 38)

Although Irish governments were later forced to engage more proactively with the Northern Ireland problem, the Good Friday agreement of 1998 finally resolved the inter-state dispute about the status of Northern Ireland, acknowledging it as part of the United Kingdom, albeit inhabited by a bicomunal population and endowed with a mechanism for transferring sovereignty to the Republic. But this mechanism in effect comprises a “quadruple lock” on the path to Irish unity.¹² The formal requirements for Irish unity require a positive response from at least four actors:

- The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who, according to the Good Friday agreement, may direct the holding of a poll “if at any time it appears likely to him that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland”
- The Northern Ireland electorate, which would be asked to give its consent by majority vote to leave the United Kingdom and join the Republic of Ireland
- The Oireachtas (Dáil and Seanad) in the Republic, which would need to enact legislation to provide for a referendum on Irish unity (and this would depend, in effect, on a decision of the government to proceed with such an initiative)
- The southern Irish electorate, which would be required to give its consent to reunification of Ireland by majority vote.

The most secure guarantee of Northern Ireland’s constitutional position seems to lie, in reality, not in the votes of a majority there, nor in any (reversible) Westminster statute, but in the (inflexible) Irish constitution. It is not likely that any southern government would be prepared to pursue parliamentary support for a referendum unless this either seemed politically advantageous (an improbable prospect), or it was forced to do so by

circumstances outside its control (a less improbable prospect). The electorate of the Republic would also have to be favourably disposed, but public opinion poll evidence offers little support for the view that southern voters want Irish unity (Coakley, 2009: 86-88). Indeed, a leading architect of the agreement, former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, is on record as expressing the view that a simple pro-unity majority in Northern Ireland would be insufficient to kick-start the movement towards Irish unity.¹³

In this context, the prospects for the attainment of Irish unity as a consequence of demographic shift in Northern Ireland would be uncertain even if Catholic opinion was solidly lined up behind this policy. But as this paper has shown, Catholic opinion is divided on this question, making the prospects for political unity through this route even more remote. It would, however, be dangerous to project current trends too far into the future. Unpredictable developments (such as Scottish independence, realignment within the European Union, or important economic changes) might promote a rethink on the question of Irish unity on the part of Protestants and Catholics alike. In the absence of such change, though, there is no reason to assume that the long-term impact of the Irish border will be different from that of other international frontiers that divide peoples, and serve to differentiate them further over time.

Almost 50 years ago, the noted Norwegian political scientist Stein Rokkan observed that “votes count, but resources decide the outcome in the end” (Rokkan, 1966: 105). It is clear that, constitutionally, votes count in Northern Ireland. But the outcome, and the result of any collective vote, is likely to depend not on raw emotion but on perception of resource implications. The path to Irish unity is likely to depend, then, not on abstract expressions of public opinion but on concrete decisions, by governments and peoples alike, based on perceptions of mutual advantage. From this perspective, it is not so much the flow of public opinion, or the inevitabilities of demography, as the geopolitics of these islands in a broader EU context (in other words, the UK’s Scottish question, and the EU’s British question) that is likely to determine the future status of Northern Ireland.

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the conference on “Elections, public opinion and turnout”, University College Dublin, 31 May – 1 June 2012, and at the seminar series of the Institute for

the Study of Conflict Transformation and Social Justice, Queen’s University Belfast, 19 March 2014. I am indebted to participants for their comments, and to Niall Ó Dochartaigh for assistance in the preparation of this paper. I am also indebted to the data archives which supplied the following datasets: the Northern Ireland Loyalty Survey, 1968 (ICPSR, study 7237); Northern Ireland Attitudes Survey, 1978 (UK Data Archive, study 1347); Northern Ireland Social Attitudes surveys, annually, 1989–1991, 1993–1996 (UK Data Archive, studies 2792, 2841, 2953, 3440, 3590, 3797, 4130); Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys, annually, 1998–2010 and 2012 (available from ARK – Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive: www.ark.ac.uk/nilt).

2. The elections took place in 1885, 1886, 1892, 1895, 1900, 1906, and January and December 2010.
3. The elections took place in 1929, 1933, 1938, 1945, 1949, 1953, 1958, 1962 and 1965.
4. This account is based on the *Irish Times*, 28 May 1914, the *Sunday Independent*, 31 May 1914, Ireland, 1912, and other sources.
5. Parallel to the role played by Protestant antiquarians and political figures in stimulating Irish nationalism, elements of the Swedish-speaking dominant class in Finland, the Baltic German pastors in Russia’s Baltic provinces and the Bohemian German nobility played a major role in the early Finnish, Estonian, Latvian and Czech national movements (Coakley, 1980).
6. Fieldwork for the survey took place in March – August 1968, before the first widely publicised incidents in the civil rights movement and the march on 5 October 1968 that first attracted widespread media attention.
7. Computed from Ireland, 1913: 44 and Ireland, 1912: 47-9. The 1911 census reports did not break religion down by age group, but for other reasons reported the number of children aged nine or less in the case of the major denominations.
8. This figure was not reported, but data on family size in respect of married women who had completed their families was provided for each socio-economic group (this category was defined as “women married only once who married before age 45 and who were aged 45 and over on census day and enumerated with their husbands”). The data show much higher family sizes within each socio-economic group in respect of Catholic mothers, and the overall totals for all groups may be computed (Northern Ireland, 1965a: 24-40).
9. The proportion not stating their religion, or indicating that they had none, increased from 0.4% (1951) to 1.9% (1961), to 9.4% (1971) to 18.5% (1981). The 1991 census reported the proportion of Catholics as 38.4%, other denominations 50.6%, no religion (a new category) 3.7%, and not stated 7.3% (Northern Ireland, 1993: 1). In 2001, the reported proportions for Catholics were 40.3%, other Christian denominations 45.5%, other religions 0.3%, and those with no religion or not stating their religion 13.9%. Reallocation of the last category yielded the following: Catholics, 43.8%, Protestants and other Christian denominations 53.1%, other religions 0.4%, none 2.7%. For general background, See Northern Ireland, 2013.
10. The mean Protestant response in this category was 22% (ranging from 14% to 29% over the period 1998-2012, excluding 2011); the mean Catholic response was 3% (ranging from 2% to 5%).
11. In the March 1973 plebiscite the question was “Do you want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom or do you want Northern Ireland to be joined with the Republic of Ireland outside the United Kingdom?”. Nationalist leaders had called for a boycott of the poll. In the event, the “yes” vote of 98.9%, with a turnout of 57.7%, implied that a significant number of Catholics had turned out to vote in favour of the union. If none had, only a Protestant turnout level of at least 82% could explain the result (computed from estimates of the relative proportion of Protestants and Catholics in the electorate, assuming this was the same as that in the adult population). Turnout two months later at the Assembly election (where, in the political circumstances of the time, the stakes were higher) was 70%. Some observers (such as Bob Cooper of the Alliance Party) took the view that “a very substantial section of the Catholic community had voted for the Union, especially in mixed areas” (*Irish Times*, 10 March 1973).
12. If a distinction is made between parliament and government in the Republic, then five institutions or bodies would need to give their consent, rather than the four referred to here. The requirement of a

referendum in the Republic is implied rather than explicit: article 3.1 of the constitution requires “the consent of a majority of the people, democratically expressed”.

13. He is quoted as saying that “a united Ireland could not be achieved by a simple majority poll in favour of constitutional change ... Fifty per cent plus one is not the way to do it. That would be a divisive thing to do” (*Belfast Telegraph*, 20 November 2008).

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