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The Politics of the Northern Ireland Question: From the Good Friday Agreement to Brexit

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Abstract
The Northern Ireland question still remains unanswered in 21st century politics in the British Isles. While the 1998 Good Friday Agreement largely brought an end to the decades long sectarian conflict known as the Troubles, the ethno-national debate still heavily underscores the region's politics. After the Agreement, a period of normalization of the Irish-British-Northern Irish relationship began guided by the Agreement's new system of government. However, the Brexit referendum of 2016 posed a new challenge for Northern Ireland and Ireland as the possibility of a return to a hard border between the two regions threatened decades of fragile peacebuilding. The challenge remains for the two jurisdictions to make sense of Northern Ireland's new status outside of the European Union.

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Glossary of Terms

Ireland- The Republic of Ireland: the 26 counties south of the Northern Ireland border on the island of Ireland.

NI- Northern Ireland, one of the four constituent states of the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland). Northern Ireland's 6 counties were partitioned from the Republic of Ireland in 1921 by the British government.

The Troubles- Approximately three decades (c.a. 1960-1998) of ethno-nationalist armed conflict that occured in Northern Ireland between nationalist and unionist paramilitary groups. This conflict was ended with the adoption of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 when participatory paramilitary groups agreed to disband and disarm.

The Agreement- Good Friday Agreement (sometimes commonly referred to as the Belfast Agreement). The Agreement is a system of peace agreements reached on April 10, 1998 by multiple political and paramilitary parties that put an end to the decades long conflict known as The Troubles. The Agreement set up the current consociational system of government in Northern Ireland as well as addressing issues of sovereignty, self-determination, inter-community and government relations and disarmament of paramilitary groups, amongst several other pressing concerns.

Nationalist/Republican- The belief that the Republic of Ireland has a sovereign claim over the 6 counties that make up Northern Ireland and that the United Kingdom illegally/illegitimately occupies these counties. Nationalists typically advocate for/ have advocated for the eventual reunification of all 32 counties on the island of Ireland and the creation of a unified free Irish state independent of the Crown.

Unionist/Loyalist- The belief that the United Kingdom holds a legitimate claim over the 6 counties known as Northern Ireland and that they should remain part of the United Kingdom.

Consociationalism- A system of democratic government that consists of power-sharing between parties of differing ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines. Contemporary consociational government typically operates under the principles outlined by Dutch-American political scientist Arend Lijphardt during the 1906s-70s.

EU- The European Union. A supranational organization created in 1993 comprising 27 member states within Europe that provides certain trade, travel and economic benefits.

Stormont- The term commonly used to refer to the Northern Ireland Assembly seated at Stormont Parliament buildings in Belfast.

Brexit- the United Kingdom's Exit from the European Union.

Current Major Northern Irish Political Parties

Party	Affiliation	Leader
Democratic Unionist Party	Unionist	Sir Jeffrey Mark Donaldson
Sinn Féin	Nationalist	Mary Lou McDonald
Ulster Unionist Party	Unionist	Doug Beattie
Social Democratic and Labour Party	Nationalist	Colum Eastwood
Alliance	Nonsectarian	Naomi Long
People before Profit	leftist/ pro-reunification	Collective leadership
Traditional Unionist Voice	Unionist	Jim Allister

Current Major Irish Political Parties:

Party	Affiliation	Leader
Fianna Fáil	Center right	Micheál Martin
Sinn Féin	Center left/nationalist	Mary Lou McDonald
Fine Gael	Center right	Leo Varadkar
Greens	Center left	Eamon Ryan
Labour	Center left	Ivana Bacik
Social Democrats	Center left	Catherine Murphy and Roisin

		Shortall
People Before Profit	Leftist	Collective leadership

Timeline of Events

1988- Gerry Adams and John Hume of Sinn Féin and the SDLP begin secret peace talks.

1993- Downing Street Declaration published by Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds. The Declaration re-iterates the right of the people of both jurisdictions to self determination by nature of the principle of consent. Northern Ireland would be transferred to the Republic of Ireland if the majority of the population in Northern Ireland and the Republic vote in favor of reunification. The declaration also urged peaceful settlement and allowed paramilitary parties to participate in talks on the condition that they abandoned their campaigns of violence[1].

1994- Provisional IRA/ Loyalist paramilitary ceasefire. President Bill Clinton appoints Senator George Mitchell as envoy to Northern Ireland.

1996- Provisional IRA's London bombing in Canary Wharf breaks the 1994 ceasefire.

1997- Provisional IRA announce a renewal of 1994 ceasefire. Sinn Fein agreed to the strategy of nonviolence and entered into official political talks.

1998- Good Friday Agreement was signed on April 10, 1998 in Belfast and later adopted by dual referendums by the people of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland on May 22.

1999- The first executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly was formed with David Trimble (UUP) as First Minister and Seamus Mallon (SDLP) as Deputy First Minister.

2005- IRA fully decommissions.

2006- St. Andrews Agreement restores the Northern Irish Executive after it was dissolved due to conflict between the DUP and Sinn Fein over policing matters.

2008 - Irish housing market crash. The Irish government issues its blanket guarantee for 6 major defaulting banks. The blanket guarantee lasted for two years before investors lost confidence in the country's ability to provide credit due to growing debt paired with continued economic decline.

2010- Ireland enters into a period of structural adjustment with the EU and IMF "troika" plan, valued at 67.5 billion euros of loans for Irish banks.

2016- Brexit referendum results in a Leave vote on June 23.

2016- News breaks of large scale abuse and fraud regarding Northern Ireland's Renewable Heat Initiative.

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[1] Downing Street Declaration. Department of Foreign Affairs. Ireland. 1993.

2017- Theresa May calls for a snap general election in the UK in order to bolster her Conservative majority in the House of Commons, resulting in a hung parliament. Conservatives strike a deal with the DUP to form a minority coalition.

2020- The United Kingdom officially withdraws from the EU after the ratification of the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement on January 30.

Introduction

The timeline of this paper begins in 1998 with the adoption of the Good Friday Agreement by the people of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the government of the United Kingdom. With the formal peace agreement came the end of decades of violence and the advent of an entirely new political system in Northern Ireland. The region began to forge a new future guided by the principles of the Agreement in cooperation with the Republic while maintaining its devolved status in the United Kingdom. The 21st century has posed numerous challenges for the fragile system in addition to lasting tensions between its existing nationalist and unionist forces. From the age of austerity ushered in after the 2008 worldwide financial crisis, to political scandals both in Stormont and Westminster, to the shocking Leave vote in the 2016 Brexit referendum, the question of Northern Ireland's future is still up for debate.

Methodology

Ireland is a nation with a storied yet frequently tragic history of colonialism, war, and political strife. The country has come a long way from the years of the famine in terms of economic development, specifically in recent decades. However, Ireland's history still continues to inform its politics in the 21st century. The question of Northern Ireland has been one of the defining points of contention in Irish politics in the post-war period. Northern Ireland, the 5,456 square mile chunk in the northeast corner of the island, is stuck between two sovereign nations with a highly contentious history and increasingly divergent political outlooks. Northern Ireland is a puzzle that continues to pose issues within both Irish and British politics. The story of Ireland in the 21st century is underpinned by the legacy of the bloody sectarian war fought over the span of

nearly four decades over the status of Northern Ireland. How did these two regions manage in 1998 to resolve a conflict that was previously considered intractable? What factors contributed to the normalization of Irish-British relations post-Agreement[2]? How do Northern Irish conceive of their own national identity, and what do they want for the future of their region?

This paper can only provide incomplete answers. My reflection on the Northern Ireland question beginning with the Agreement up until the contemporary post Brexit period is my attempt at teasing through each layered question. Brexit is perhaps one of the first major geopolitical events I remember being able to understand somewhat clearly. After Brexit, everything I learned about Ireland's relationship with the United Kingdom and Europe was refracted through the lens of Brexit. When I moved to Dublin in January of 2022 for my study abroad program, I thought I had a decent grasp of the nation's history and current state of affairs. However, when I began my classes for the term I quickly realized how much was missing from my understanding. I absorbed all the information I could both in and out of the classroom and returned to the United States in May better prepared to write a thesis. I knew I wanted to write about Ireland, however I had to decide which key issues I felt were the most relevant to the island today. Because my courses at Trinity College Dublin focused heavily on Irish history and politics, I had a solid foundation upon which I began to build this project.

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[2] The Good Friday Agreement will hereby be referred to as "the Agreement" for the remainder of this paper.

Background of the Good Friday Agreement

A sufficiently thorough exploration of the most important issues at play on the island today must begin with a discussion of the document that launched it into the twenty-first century: the Good Friday Agreement. Signed in 1998 after years of negotiations involving British and Irish government officials, third parties, as well as representatives from paramilitary groups from both sides, the Agreement aimed to put an end to a centuries long conflict previously considered intractable. The Agreement was considered an amazing feat of diplomacy and peace-building because for the most part, it did end the fighting. Good Friday's wide breadth of compromises regarding the final status of Northern Ireland in relation to both the Republic and the United Kingdom, a future outline for sustainable power sharing in government, the principle of self-determination for its citizens along with the many other issues it aimed to resolve is what maintains its continued political relevance. Northern Irish, Irish and British politicians keep returning to its foundational principles and protocols precisely because many of the issues it addressed are still present today. No single agreement could possibly resolve such a frustratingly complicated conflict, however its continued relevance is why it is considered such an effective and novel agreement.

Exactly why each involved party was willing to reach such an extensive agreement in the time period of the late nineties is cause for much debate amongst historians and scholars of conflict resolution theory. One major theoretical camp includes those proponents of "stalemate theory[3]." Stalemate theory states that when engaged parties reach a period of "mutually hurting stalemate,"

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[3]Zartman, William. 2001. "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments." The Global Review of Ethnopolitics, 1(1): pp. 8-18.

meaning that the utility of violence only diminishes as the conflict continues, then the conflict becomes "ripe" for peace negotiations.[4] However, critics of this camp provide a more compelling explanation of why Northern Ireland entered into an agreement after a mutual ceasefire at this specific moment in time. Some scholars argue that proponents of stalemate theory solely regard the Agreement from an elite-level "top down" perspective, and that a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the Agreement's timing can be reached by considering the point of view of "foot soldiers" in the conflict for a more "bottom up" approach[5]. The conditions of the so-called 'stalemate' in the 90s were not different enough from those during the peak of the conflict in the 70s, so it is unlikely that a mutually hurting stalemate was the only factor that bred conditions for peace negotiations. Rather, it is more likely that both loyalist and republican paramilitary groups did not perceive a stalemate and continued to remain committed to their ends. In other words, perception of a stalemate is more of an elite-led hegemonic theory that does not reflect the reality for those non-elites who were directly involved in the conflict.

Stalemate theory does not entirely explain why the Agreement succeeded at the end of the twentieth century, however the temporal aspect of the theory has merits. The popular counterpoint to stalemate theory qualifies it by arguing that a system of changing norms on both sides of the conflict preceded peace negotiations as opposed to mutual perception of a hurting stalemate.

Parties from either side did not change their ideology per se, but rather their specific policy objectives changed in response to the increase of violence beginning in the 1970s. Evolving

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Tonge, Jonathan, Shirlow, P & McAuley J. 2011. "So Why Did the Guns Fall Silent? How Interplay, Not Stalemate, Explains the Northern Ireland Peace Process", Irish Political Studies, 26, (1) pp. 1-18.

socio-political factors that existed alongside the violence of the Troubles likely pushed each side to the negotiating table rather than military stalemate in and of itself. For example, by the start of negotiations, the nationalist political party Fianna Fáil in the Republic[6] had shifted its focus away from the immediate goal of a united Ireland towards cooperating with other parties to achieve peace[7]. Additionally, both republican and loyalist[8] paramilitary groups moved closer into the sphere of politics in order to achieve their ends without necessarily sacrificing their original principles, the most well known example of which was former Irish Republican Army (IRA) frontman Gerry Adams' rise as the leader of the newly revamped Sinn Fein party. Neither side transitioned into politics because they perceived a military stalemate, but rather sought to explore mediums beyond the battlefield. Furthermore, it was not clear that either side even perceived a military stalemate in the years preceding the start of negotiations. Nationalist paramilitaries continued to conduct attacks, famously the IRA's series of London bombings, one of which was an attempt to kill then Prime Minister John Major in 1991[9]. While nationalists were still at war, popular sentiment amongst unionist paramilitaries was that they had already defeated the IRA by the 1990s[10].

Aspects of the Good Friday Negotiations

The nature of the Good Friday negotiations themselves allowed for their success in addition to their timing. Barabra Walter argues that the credible self interest of participants in peace processes (parties, individuals and guarantors) increases the likelihood of a successful

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[6] "The Republic" refers to the Republic of Ireland.
[7] Coakley, J. (2017): 'Adjusting to Partition: From Irredentism to "Consent" in Twentieth-Century Ireland', Irish Studies Review, 25(2), pp. 193-214.
[8] The terms "nationalist/republican" and "unionist/loyalist" are typically used interchangeably.
[9] "Timeline - Worst IRA Bomb Attacks on Mainland Britain." *Reuters*, 16 May 2011.
[10] Tonge, Jonathan, Shirlow, P & McAuley J. 2011. "So Why Did the Guns Fall Silent? How Interplay, Not Stalemate, Explains the Northern Ireland Peace Process", Irish Political Studies, 26, (1)

agreement[11]. While both nationalist and unionist actors in the north had an obvious interest in resolving the conflict, even London overcame its perceived ambivalence with regards to the status of Northern Ireland. Some scholars argue that Britain's historical cultural tie to the Island produced its interest in peace negotiation[12]. London likely faced additional external diplomatic pressure to engage as a result of the United States' instrumental role as guarantor. Although revolving the conflict was not seen as one of London's primary policy objectives up until the 1990s, British politicians demonstrated a concerted interest in retaining Northern Ireland as a part of the union[13]. Both the United States and the United Kingdom served as credible guarantors of the conflict precisely because of their personal, political and historical ties to the region. The United States wished to maintain its diplomatic ties with both the U.K. and the Republic of Ireland as well as continue to maintain its status as the preeminent international peacekeeper.[14] London had similar motives to the United States albeit with a much closer tie to the conflict.

Both London and Washington's mediation throughout the entire negotiation process was crucial to the Agreement's success. The United States, under Bill Clinton's administration, sent Senator George Mitchell to chair the negotiations as a peace envoy. Senator Mitchell's unwavering commitment to impartiality greatly improved the morale of all participating parties and sided the process along whenever the group reached an impasse. After the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) refused to sit down with Sinn Fein after the IRA broke the ceasefire in 1996, the Clinton

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[11] Walter, Barbra F. Committing to Peace: the Successful Settlement of Civil War. Princeton: Princeton Press, 2002.

[12] Bueno de Mesquita, Ethan. 2004, "Conciliation, Counterterrorism, and Patterns of Terrorist Violence", International Organization, (59), pp. 145-176.

[13] Prime Minister Tony Blair, Britain's envoy to the GFA , stated in Belfast just four years after its signing that "None of us in hall today, even the youngest, is likely to see Northern Ireland as anything but a part of the United Kingdom" (Tonge et al 2011).

[14] McGarry, John, and Brendan O'Leary. "Consociational Theory, Northern Ireland's Conflict, and Its Agreement. Part 1: What Consociationalists Can Learn from Northern Ireland." Government and Opposition, vol. 41, no. 1, Jan. 2006, pp. 43–63.

administration and various Irish-American lobbying groups urged the IRA to renew the ceasefire. Thanks to external pressures from the United States and American mediation within northern Ireland, the IRA agreed to renew in the same terms as the 1994 ceasefire, in turn bringing the DUP back to the negotiation table. Additionally, the release of the general plan of the Agreement in January of 1998 along with Mitchell's setting of the April 10 deadline greatly improved all party's confidence that the process was yielding tangible results.

The British delegation entered the negotiation process with more reluctance than the American delegation, but with stronger interest in maintaining the renewed ceasefire. The United Kingdom's main goal in entering the process was to prevent future violence, while retaining its sovereignty and territorial claim over Northern Ireland. Northern Irish unionists still expected support from Westminster.[15] Unionist anxiety stemmed from the Agreement's proposed methods of north-south power sharing. David Trimble, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), voiced concerns regarding the level of power and autonomy the proposed North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC) would have over the Northern Ireland Assembly. Unionists feared that delegating too much cross-border power to the proposed NSMC would threaten the North's place in the Union, while nationalists demanded a form of cross-border cooperation in exchange for the Republic agreeing to drop its constitutional claim over Northern Ireland. Trimble demanded that the Council draw its authority solely from the Northern Ireland Assembly and Dáil Éireann and remain accountable to the two institutions. Prime Minister Blair backed the unionist position regarding the NSMC. Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern also agreed to negotiate on the Council in order to keep unionists at the negotiating table and prevent the collapse of the

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[15]Wilford, Rick. *Aspects of the Belfast Agreemen*t. New York, 2001. pp. 166-183.

Agreement[16]. The Agreement set up a NSMC with no executive powers and no path to a united

Ireland as a result of the compromise. Instead, the question of the united Ireland was relegated to

the principle of consent integral to the Northern Ireland Assembly established by the Agreement.

These compromises regarding north-south cooperation were essential to unionist acceptance of

the Agreement and its success as a whole. Unionists under the guidance of the British delegation,

accepted that they were better off participating in the new government set up by the Agreement

in order to protect Northern Ireland's place in the Union. If they refused to negotiate and held out

with regards to north-south power sharing, they would risk losing their power to influence the

Agreement all together. It was a better strategic decision to accept power-sharing with

nationalists than abandon the process altogether.

Lastly, perhaps the most significant contributor to the success of the Agreement was its inclusion

of the conflict's veto players. Scholars consider the IRA, Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and

Ulster Defense Association (UDA) to be the three main internal veto players of the Troubles due

to their ability to halt the negotiation process by employing their "veto." The number of veto

players in the Good Friday negotiations posed an array of problems. The more veto players are

involved in a peace negotiation, the less likely negotiators will be able to produce an agreement

that satisfies all parties. The decreased likelihood of a satisfactory agreement in turn increased

the likelihood of holdouts, parties that stall negotiations on purpose in order to press for their

demands to be met. There is a strong incentive in multiparty negotiations like Good Friday for

each party to become a holdout because the last party to agree to its terms holds the most power.

Thus, mediators must handle veto players tactfully and intentionally throughout the entire

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[16] McCann, David and McGrattan, *Cillian. Sunningdale, the Ulster Workers' Council Strike and the Struggle for Democracy in Northern Ireland*. Manchester University Press, 2013. pp. 174-189.

process[17]. Veto player management theory pushed back on the mainstream conception of civil wars as a two-party dynamic; a conflict between the state and an insurgent group. Rather, the theory argues that the reality of modern civil wars is much more complicated, oftentimes consisting of competing insurgent factions and internal state interests, especially when the conflict is between competing ethno-national groups.

There are multiple types of veto players within the theoretical literature that each serve a different function during civil war negotiations. Internal and external veto players are the two main types. Original insurgent groups and subsequent splinter organizations constitute the internal veto player category. The IRA, UVF and UDA as well as the Provisional IRA and Real IRA (extremist off-shoots of the IRA) are the original insurgent groups and their splinters in this case. Third party guarantors and other opportunist groups constitute the external veto player category[18]. The United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland and United States as well as the European Union act as external veto players. The third main is the within state veto player; negotiating parties within the government, including both its moderate and extremist wings[19]. Sinn Féin, the SDLP, UUP, Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), and Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) all acted as within-state veto players. The Alliance Party and Northern Ireland Women's Coalition were also party to the negotiations but did not hold enough bargaining power to be considered within-state veto players.

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[17] Cunningham, David E. 2006. "Veto players and civil war duration." American Journal of Political Science 50 (4): 875-892.
[18] Ibid.
[19]Bakke, Kristin M., Cunningham K.G., and Lee JM Seymour. 2012. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars." Perspectives on Politics 10 (2): 265-283.

Sinn Féin's involvement in the negotiation process was key to the Agreement's success because they were a major, if not the major veto player throughout the duration of the Troubles. Although the party's entrance into the realm of politics was the cause of great controversy for both nationalists and unionists, Sinn Fein representatives played a crucial role in terms of representing the nationalist platform in Belfast. Sinn Féin's role as the political extension of the IRA was crucial because it allowed for at least some control of the organization's more extremist wing: the Real IRA. The IRA and its splinter groups were considered "spoilers" to the Good Friday peace process. Spoiler logic states that when a terrorist group is divided into moderate and extremist factions, concessions made by the moderate faction to the government during peace negotiations might actually cause an increase in retaliatory violence from the more extremist factions[20]. When extremist factions backslide into violence in an attempt to stall negotiations, they become "spoilers." The Sinn Fein/Provisional IRA and Real IRA split is a classic example of the spoiler problem. Sinn Fein's participation greatly helped to mitigate the spoiler problem because it demonstrated a credible commitment to peace from the nationalist camp. Additionally, public opinion began to shift away from support of violent paramilitary groups towards a diplomatic solution. Sinn Féin's leadership capitalized on this shift in public opinion and seized control of the nationalist narrative in order to demonstrate their commitment to peace. Now that Sinn Féin effectively controlled the nationalist narrative, the Real IRA's commitment to violence became less mainstream and attractive to civilian nationalists.

Despite Sinn Féin's best efforts to renounce its ties with the IRA, the party's reputation was never fully divorced from the IRA. In a way, Sinn Féin's inability to shake its past provided the

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[20] Bueno de Mesquita, Ethan. 2004, "Conciliation, Counterterrorism, and Patterns of Terrorist Violence", International Organization, (59), pp. 145-176.

party with the political and social clout necessary to secure a secure place at the negotiating table in Belfast and effectively advocate for the nationalist position. Gerry Adams, the president of Sinn Féin during the peace process, denied ever being a member of the IRA. Although anyone in Northern Ireland at the time would be able to see through his obvious facade, Adams' name recognition and notoriety provided some source of legitimacy for the party as a serious political project. Martin McGuiness, another well-known IRA frontman, served as the party's delegate to the peace process. Adams led the nationalist charge into the realm of politics and away from paramilitary violence at the same time as the Northern Irish electorate was growing tired of violence from both sides. Sinn Féin instead demonstrated its commitment to peaceful resolution while also providing a palatable political option for nationalists. Adams spoke of his commitment to peaceful resolution in a joint statement with John Hume (leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party) in 1993 prior to the initial ceasefire:

> "*As leaders of our respective parties we have told each other that we see the task of reaching agreement on a peaceful and democratic accord for all on this island as our primary challenge.*
>
> *We both recognise that such a new agreement is only achievable and viable if it can earn and enjoy the allegiance of the different traditions on this island, by accommodating diversity and providing for national reconciliation*[21]"

Through this strategy, Adams' party was able to gain majority, somewhat cohesive control over the nationalist position by relegating the violent Real IRA to the fringes. Other negotiating parties were able to suspend their disbelief that Adams, a known IRA frontman, could be committed to peaceful resolution because the Real IRA as the nationalist extremist wing was a markedly worse option.

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[21] "John Hume/Gerry Adams Joint Statement," Sinn Fein, April 23, 1993.

Unionist spoilers were also mitigated through a similar process. The major unionist paramilitary spoilers included Gary McMichael of the Ulster Democratic Party and David Ervine of the Progressive Unionist Party. Entering into the negotiating table with Sinn Fein was a point of contention for even moderate unionists at the outset of the process during the early 1990s. The attitude amongst unionists was that the agreement was a somewhat disingenuous nationalist led project and that Sinn Féin did not have genuine intentions of brokering peace. Although Sinn Féin was already well established in the political sphere by the mid-90s[22], the Real IRA was still engaging in a campaign of violence even after the 1994 mutual ceasefire which provoked unionist skepticism[23]. However, after Sinn Fein's re-commitment to ceasefire in 1997, unionists felt the onus to formally cooperate with the nationalist delegation despite their doubts.

Components of the Agreement

The Good Friday Agreement was accepted by referendums in the Republic and the North on May 22, 1998. Voter turnout for the referendum in the Republic was 56%, with 94% voting in favor. In the North, voter turnout was 81% with 71% voting in favor[24]. Both communities voted to accept constitutional changes both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, as well as a series of provisions for the new consociational government and the future of the system. The Irish government officially accepted for the first time that Northern Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom, revoking Ireland's claim over the region and implicitly amending articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution. Subsequently, the British Parliament repealed the Government of Ireland

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[22] Sinn Fein won 15.5% of the vote in the 1996 Northern Irish Parliament elections, though they were barred from participating in ongoing multi party talks due to the breach of the ceasefire earlier that year. (Wolff in Wilford 2001)
[23] Ginty, Roger Mac, et al. "No War, No Peace: Northern Ireland after the Agreement." Political Psychology, vol. 28, no. 1, Feb. 2007, pp. 1–11.
[24] The Good Friday Agreement, Citizensinformation.ie,

act of 1920, which partitioned the island and re-asserted the United Kingdom's claim over the whole island. Additionally, the principle of consent was introduced by the Agreement stating that if the majority of people in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland wish to vote to reunify, the result must be respected by both communities. If both jurisdictions were to vote in favor of reunification, then the United Kingdom and Ireland are legally bound by international law to respect that decision. The consent principle left the future status of Northern Ireland's statehood up to popular discretion. The third major breakthrough of the Agreement was its provision that allowed Northern Irish citizens to self-designate as either Irish, British, or both. Citizens were able to hold either a British, Irish, or both passports.

The Agreement is composed of two separate documents that are meant to work in tandem. The first document, commonly referred to as the Multi-party Agreement, a treaty signed by the Irish and British governments as well as eight parties within Northern Ireland. The second document, the British-Irish Agreement is an international treaty signed by both the Irish and British governments. The groups representing the unionist camp were the Ulster Unionist Party, Progressive Unionist Party and Ulster Democratic Party. The Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defense association were the two paramilitary groups represented by the PUP and the UDP respectively. The two nationalist parties were the SDLP and Sinn Féin. The Alliance Party and Northern Ireland Women's Coalition also served as the two independent parties.

The new institutions established by the Agreement are broken down into three strands. Strand one consists of the Northern Ireland Executive and Northern Ireland Assembly. The dual executive consists of two heads of state: the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The

First Minister is appointed by the largest party while the Deputy First Minister is appointed by the second largest party. The two ministers hold equal power and authority over the executive. Due to the nature of the joint executive, if one Minister were to resign, the other would subsequently be forced to resign as one Minister cannot hold his/her post without the other. The resignation of one or both Ministers vacates the entire office, triggering a seven day period in which the executive must be re-formed. If ministers fail to appoint a new executive within the seven day time period, the entire Northern Ireland Assembly is dissolved and new elections are called. The Northern Ireland Assembly, commonly referred to by its metonym "Stormont", democratically elected parliamentary unicameral legislature. The Assembly assures the system of power-sharing through three methods. The first method is the use of the D'Hondt system for ministerial selection, meaning that ministerial positions[25] are distributed to each party proportional to their strength in the legislature. The second mechanism involves a required level of cross-community support in order for certain bills to pass the legislature. Since each member of the Assembly is required to designate as either Nationalist, Unionist, or other, cross-community support is required on matters of the assembly in order to uphold power sharing[26]. The third mechanism allows for the exercise of said threshold of cross-community support. If 30 or more members propose a "petition of concern" to the Speaker regarding legislation, then it will only pass if 60% of voting members (consisting of 40% of nationalist and 40% of unionist members) vote in favor of the legislation. The petition of concern and qualified majority system ensures protection of the minority party from contentious legislation that they perceive would unjustly favor the majority community[27].

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[25] With the exception of Justice.
[26] *The Good Friday Agreement,* Citizensinformation.ie.
[27] Ibid

Good Friday Agreement Major Negotiating Parties, Non-Exhaustive[28]

People	Party	Affiliation
John Hume	SDLP	Nationalist
Martin McGuinness	SF	Nationalist
David Trimble	UUP	Unionist
Ian Paisley	DUP	Unionist
Tony Blair	Labour	Neutral*
Bertie Ahern	Fianna Fáil	Nationalist
George Mitchell	Democrat	Neutral*

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[28] Tony Blair, and George Mitchell's affiliations indicate each representative's neutral stance for the intents and purposes of the negotiation process itself, not the Northern Ireland question in general.

After the Agreement in Ireland and the United Kingdom

Implementation of Strands 2 and 3 Post 1998

After the Agreement was adopted in 1998, North-South and East-West relations remained in flux. The Agreement, while considered a novel success, was not a cure all by any means and brought with it its own set of political, social, and economic issues. The Good Friday Agreement ushered in an era of normalization of the British-Irish relationship due to its devolved constitutional structure and introduction of regulatory bodies to enforce the conditions of the Agreement. It set up a system of north-south and east-west institutions that aimed to resolve policy disputes between opposing parties both formally and informally. The effectiveness and longevity of these informal arrangements are disputed, but nevertheless underpin the Agreement as a guarantor of stability and a symbol of the normalization of relations between Ireland and the United Kingdom[29].

Although formal and informal institutions were established with the aim of continued conflict resolution, the functionality of these institutions has been fraught. The Agreement established a set of expectations that have not been legally codified, but rather left up to interpretation by lawmakers and citizens.[30] The Agreement struck a delicate balance between nationalist and

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[29] Todd, Jennifer. "Contested Constitutionalism? Northern Ireland and the British-Irish Relationship since 2010." Parliamentary Affairs, vol. 70, no. 2, Apr. 2017, pp. 301–21.

[30] Jennifer Todd argues that one of the defining aspects of the GFA was that its principles of "legitimacy, authority, equality and sovereignty" were some of the least explicitly defined and developed in the text of the Agreement. This was done in order to actually secure agreement from all involved parties on the semantics of the text. However, leaving these paramount principles up for debate by such a divided society has been a source of contention within the Northern Irish legislature. (Todd 2017)

unionist interests in part because of this ambiguity. Both sides demonstrated a credible commitment to maintaining this balance for the sake of stability, cessation of violence, and the anticipation of changing norms and policy objectives in Northern Ireland. North-south and east-west cooperation did exist before the Agreement, however its system of institutionalized collaboration allowed more organic participation from both governments outside of EU monetary incentives.

The North South Ministerial Council (North-South)

The Agreement's consociationalism was intended by its architects to begin an ongoing process of cooperation between the Irish state, Northern Ireland polity and United Kingdom. One mechanism set up by Strand 2 is the assurance of north-south cooperation. Strand 2 established the North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC) as the main channel of communication between the Republic and Northern Ireland. Although Ireland relinquished its constitutional claim over the territory of Northern Ireland as a main tenant of the Agreement, it still insisted on maintaining some degree of influence over matters in Ulster. Ministers from both the Republic and Northern Ireland's governments meet either once or twice a year in order to deliberate on all-Ireland matters assigned to the Council. The NSMC and Northern Ireland Executive at Stormont were designed to be mutually interdependent. The idea behind the Council and the Assembly's mutual interdependence is that neither body is allowed to function without the other. If unionists want to retain power in the devolved Sotrmont assembly, they must participate in the cross border Council. Conversely, if nationalists want to maintain the Council's all-Ireland decision making, they must participate in Stormont.[31] All decisions made by the NSMC require

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[31]Bell, Christine, (2003), *Peace Agreements and Human Rights*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 141.

cross community support, cementing the body's own consociational nature within the broader system outlined by the Agreement.

The Agreement tasked the NSMC with six areas of north-south cooperation: agriculture, education, environment, health, tourism and transport. The Council agrees on approaches to each of these six topics and applies them separately in each jurisdiction. The Council is made up of six implementation bodies in order to carry out policy regarding these six areas: Waterways Ireland, the Food Safety Promotion Board, the Special EU Programmes Body, the North/South Language Body, the Trade and Business Development Body, and the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission[32].

In 2017, a study[33] was conducted by the European Commission Task Force for the Preparation and Conduct of the Negotiations with the United Kingdom on the level of cooperation achieved by the NSMC constituent bodies. After the Leave vote, the European Union conducted this study in order to assess how Strand 2 of the Agreement could potentially be altered if Northern Ireland no longer remained within the EU Common Trade Area or Customs Union. The results of the study show a high level of cross community cooperation on several key issues such as data protection, state aid rules and health and safety employment frameworks. One of the main goals of the NSMC is to prevent the re-imposition of a hard border between the North and the Republic, which has re-emerged as a possibility as a result of Brexit. Additionally, the Council receives a significant amount of funding from the European Union in order to maintain the soft border. Strand 2 of the Agreement explicitly requires the NSMC "to consider the European

[32]"North South Implementation Bodies." North South Ministerial Council, 27 July 2020.
[33] "UK Government Documents Relating to 'Mapping Exercise' Examining North-South Cooperation on the Island of Ireland Published." European Union News, 21 June 2019.

Union dimension of relevant matters, including the implementation of EU policies and programmes and proposals under consideration in the EU framework. Arrangements to be made to ensure that the views of the Council are taken into account and represented appropriately at relevant EU meetings.[34]" It is heavily implied in the language of the Agreement that the functionality of the NSMC was predicated on the assumption that the United Kingdom would remain in the European Union indefinitely. Beyond the issue of funding, the UK's withdrawal from the EU complicates the future of north-south cooperation as an integral aspect of the Agreement and ongoing consociational project.

The British Irish Council and British Irish Intergovernmental Council (East-West)

Strand 3 of the Agreement established the British-Irish Council (BIC) as the primary mechanism of cooperation between Ireland and the United Kingdom. Representatives from Scotland, Wales and crown dependencies Guernsey, Jersey and Isle of Man are also party to the Council. The BIC meets during two annual meetings of all representatives as well as smaller, section-led meetings at the discretion of each sub-group. The purpose of the BIC is to "Promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships amongst peoples of these islands[35]". The BIC's creation assured unionists at the time of the Agreement that there would be adequate east-west institutionalization to counteract the power of the NSMC[36]. The BIC ushered in a period of normalization with regards to Irish-United Kingdom relations post 1998 as well as the normalization of the Irish government informally intervening in matters of Northern Irish

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[34]"Northern Ireland Act 1998." Northern Ireland Act 1998, vol. English text of the Act of 1998 as amended to 2002, Jan. 2010.
[35] Walker, Graham "The British Irish Council" from Wilford, Rick. *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*. New York, 2001, pp. 129-141.
[36] ibid

politics[37]. The Irish government's unique role in the Council is described in the BIC's founding principles:

"In recognition of the Irish Government's special interest in Northern Ireland and of the extent to which issues of mutual concern arise in relation to Northern Ireland, there will be regular and frequent meetings of the Conference concerned with non- devolved Northern Ireland matters, on which the Irish Government may put forward views and proposals. These meetings, to be co-chaired by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, would also deal with all-island and cross-border co-operation on non-devolved issues.

Co-operation within the framework of the Conference will include facilitation of co-operation in security matters. The Conference also will address, in particular, the areas of rights, justice, prisons and policing in Northern Ireland (unless and until responsibility is devolved to a Northern Ireland administration) and will intensify cooperation between the two Governments on the all-island or cross-border aspects of these matters[38]."

The British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) is the second east-west body created by Strand 3. The BIIGC handles matters devolved to the Northern Irish Assembly when Stormont is dissolved, effectively acting as a fallback body[39]. The Conference typically meets several times a year and is chaired by the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs and the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Despite EU funding allocated to cross-border civil service cooperation throughout the 1990s, cooperation was relegated to certain departments and there was little horizontal communication

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[37] Tannam, Etain. "Intergovernmental and Cross-Border Civil Service Cooperation: The Good Friday Agreement and Brexit." Ethnopolitics, vol. 17, no. 3, June 2018, pp. 243–62.

[38]"Northern Ireland Act 1998." Northern Ireland Act 1998, vol. English text of the Act of 1998 as amended to 2002, Jan. 2010.

[39] Such matters include but are not limited to: immigration and Common Travel Area issues, EU matters, social security and education.

between departments. Funds were largely controlled by the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Northern Ireland Office, the Department of the Taoiseach, and each respective Finance department. The formal institutions of cross border cooperation such as the BIC set up by the Agreement aimed to alleviate this issue. Since both the Irish government and United Kingdom government had a vested interest in maintaining the peace process, cooperation must exist between all civil service departments. The EU's funding during the 1990s paired with the institutionalization of east-west cooperative bodies bolstered each government's commitment to the BIC and BIIGC after the Agreement[40]. Although similar bodies existed pre-1998, the spirit and ethos of the Agreement motivated each party to participate more robustly in the normalization of the British-Irish relationship for the sake of peacebuilding

Austerity in the U.K.

The financial crash of 2007-2008 sent the world into a crisis, hitting the world's financial centers particularly hard. The recession that ensued after 2008 saw London scrambling to alleviate its effects in Westminster. David Cameron and his Conservative party introduced a system of austerity measures in an attempt to compensate for financial losses and reverse the recession. This "age of austerity[41]" signaled a change in character of the Conservative party reminiscent of Thatcherite trickle-down policies intended to stimulate economic growth. This period of austerity began with Cameron's ascent to Prime Minister in 2010 and has sustained successive iterations to the present day[42]. Cameron, along with Chancellor George Osbourne shifted the UK's fiscal policy towards a series of public spending cuts in order to produce a balanced budget. Closing

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[40] Tannam, Etain. "Intergovernmental and Cross-Border Civil Service Cooperation: The Good Friday Agreement and Brexit." Ethnopolitics, vol. 17, no. 3, June 2018, pp. 243–62.

[41]"David Cameron Warns of 'Age of Austerity'." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 26 Apr. 2009.

[42] Some austerity measures were introduced in 2008 by the Labour government but had marginal impact.

the UK's budget deficit was the ultimate goal of austerity, a goal that remained lofty during the

early 2010s and became even more improbable with the Brexit referendum of 2016.

Cameron's age of austerity continued through the country's stagnant economic growth of the first

half of the 2010s. Government debt as a percentage of GDP decreased at the same time as

increases in unemployment.[43] Plans to eliminate the budget deficit by 2020, a goal post that

shifted further into the future as a result of economic stagnation, were postponed after the Brexit

referendum. Conservative austerity also involved funding cuts to the National Health Service, a

palpable consequence for all UK citizens. This period of stagnation left many UK citizens

unhappy with the current economic and political environment they perceived as solely benefiting

elites. The economic environment created a prime environment for populist politicians to gain

traction. The story of populism in the UK in the twenty-first century begins with politicians

capitalizing on the nation's somewhat ambient but ubiquitous dissatisfaction with Tory austerity.

Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) entered at the perfect political

moment, allowing it to gain traction with a significant but underestimated section of the

population. Those who felt slighted by years of harsh austerity with little tangible benefits for

British citizens found solace in UKIP's anti-establishment, pro-economic reform platform.

UKIP, founded in 1991, remained in the background of Westminster for the majority of the

2000s. It was not until the 2004 European Parliament election that the party gained a significant

presence in the sphere of European politics[44]. Farage then became the party's leader in 2006.

UKIP had always been staunchly eurosceptic, however it was not until they took the reins of the

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[43]"This Is the Truth about Whether or Not Austerity Is Really Over." The Independent, Independent Digital News and Media, 6 July 2017.
[44]UKIP won 16.% percent of the Parliament's seats. (Winarto 2022)

Brexit campaign in 2016 that the single-issue party began to resonate with UK voters. UKIP

framed the pre-2016 years of economic stagnation as a result of corrupt politicians of the

Conservative party and EU slashing social benefits while reaping the profits of austerity for

themselves. The other main tenant of UKIP's party philosophy was the argument that immigrants

from Eastern Europe and the EU migrating to the UK and "taking jobs from" Britons while

benefiting from what few social benefits remained. UKIP's anti-establishment, xenophobic

populism allowed the party to become a serious threat to Conservative-Labour hegemony.

Austerity in Ireland

The differences in the emergence of populism out of the period of economic downturn after 2008

in both the UK and Ireland now merit discussion. Ireland was hit hard by the financial crisis of

2008 as a result of its housing bubble collapsing and subsequent housing crisis. A regime of

austerity was instituted in Ireland, though not to the extent of the UK's "age of austerity." Ireland

experienced a minor surge of populist sentiment in response to austerity, similar to the UK.

However, the Irish government was not shaken by populist surge, Dublin returned to business as

usual.[45] After Ireland's Celtic Tiger period came crashing down, the country opened itself up to

foreign aid, although somewhat reluctantly. The existing party system in Dublin was able to tame

the financial crisis without severe austerity measures as a result of EU bailouts and investment.

Ireland's Celtic Tiger period (1995-2007) saw rapid economic expansion, specifically in the

banking and financial sectors. Ireland's major banks saw significant increases in foreign

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[45]Kenny, David "Always, Inevitably Local: Ireland's Strange Populism and the Trouble with Theory" Jean Monnet Working Paper no. 7/2017, NYU School of Law, New York, NY.

investments as well as increases in bond borrowing.[46] However, despite this period of rapid

economic growth, banks were left exposed to the growing housing market bubble. It was only a

matter of time until Ireland felt the effects of the 2008 housing market crash in the United States

as a result of this high exposure to the housing bubble. The market crash created severe solvency

problems for Ireland's 6 major banks (Bank of Ireland, Allied Irish Banks, Anglo-Irish Bank,

Irish Life & Permanent, Irish Nationwide Building Society, and Educational Building Society).

In an attempt to alleviate these issues and keep banks afloat, the government issued a set of

guarantees for banks beginning in 2008 in addition to a bailout for Bank of Ireland and Allied

Irish Bank valued at 3.5 billion euro each[47]. However, this guarantee only lasted for about two

years, and in 2010 Ireland was forced to turn to the EU, ECB and IMF for help. The state was

hemorrhaging money it was not making back trying to keep these banks afloat during the

recession period. In November 2010, Ireland entered into a structural adjustment plan with the

IMF and the EU equalling to about 67.5 billion euros[48]. EU and IMF assistance, the "Troika",

compounded with Ireland's domestic austerity measures in order to reduce the budget deficit.

Irish politicians were reluctant to enter into an adjustment plan with the IMF and rather preferred

to sustain the blanket guarantee. However, it became evident that by 2010, the state could no

longer keep its major banks afloat and IMF, EU and ECB assistance was necessary. Irish

politicians entered into private negotiations with IMF officials before the deal was formally

announced in the fall of 2010[49].

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[46]"Dr Alan Ahearne: Debt Still a Huge Challenge despite Our Foreign Assets." Independent, Independent.ie, 4 Dec. 2012.
[47]This blanket guarantee was considered unorthodox and overly ambitious at the time. There was little faith this would actually work. Rather, the Irish government preferred to take every necessary measure in order to avoid an EU-IMF bailout. This strategy evidently unraveled.
[48]"Working Together: Ireland and IMF." International Monetary Fund, 1 Aug. 2018.
[49] Breen, Michael. "The International Politics of Ireland's EU/IMF Bailout." *Irish Studies in International Affairs,* vol. 23, 2012, pp. 75–87.

Lack of Large-Scale Populist Influence on Irish Politics

Austerity policies in Ireland as a response to the recession resulted in many public protests and

criticism. There were several coordinated student protests against the government's plan to

re-introduce university fees in the fall of 2010-11[50]. "Occupy Dame Street" protests were also

organized outside Dublin's major banks in 2011 in response to irresponsible lending practices

preceding the crash[51]. The austerity policy that prompted the most public response was the

proposed plan to introduce water charges[52]. Water charges became an issue that populist

movements centered around due to its widespread unpopularity and connection to more severe

austerity measures. The introduction of water charges was introduced with the 2009 budget plan,

however large scale mobilization against the charges did not occur until late 2014[53]. Right2Water

emerged as an umbrella grouping of smaller left-wing political groups who opposed austerity

measures more generally. The organization's first protest in October of 2014 drew a crowd of

over 80,000 people. Right2Water, eventually rebranding as Right2Change capitalized on a

specific issue in order to express general discontent with perceived ineptitude of political elites

and the dominant party system[54]. The success of the water movement exposed widespread

discontent with austerity measures without the use of typical populist tactics such as

anti-immigrant or overtly nationalistic rhetoric. Rather, the Right2Water movement and

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[50]"Over 25,000 Students Expected at USI Protest March" Union of Students in Ireland, 3 November 2010.

[51]"Occupy Dame Street' Protest in Dublin." RTE.ie, RTÉ, 10 Oct. 2011.

[52] Water was previously considered a public good in Ireland and issued to citizens free of charge. There was little evidence that people actually paid water charges after they wwe introduced in 2009.

[53]Kenny, David "Always, Inevitably Local: Ireland's Strange Populism and the Trouble with Theory" Jean Monet Working Paper no. 7/2017, NYU School of Law, New York, NY.

[54]Kenny argues that the advent of the Right2Water populist movement in Ireland was strictly tied to that specific issue at its main point of grievance, as opposed to a more general populist discontent with a ruling "elite." Although the movement did eventually evolve into a larger anti-austerity movement in Ireland, it did not have a lasting effect on the Irish legislature in terms of electing politicians in order to advocate for its cause, rather it maintained fairly grassroots.

subsequent anti-austerity movement remained focused on specific issues instead of directing its grievances onto a specific group or group(s) within Irish society like a typical right-wing, anti-elitist populist party.

Ireland did not have a wide populist pushback against austerity to the extent of the UK[55]. Rather, Ireland's political system managed to avoid the wave of populism that hit other major European states in response to the recession period. Scholars argue that Irish politics has always had a populist presence ever since the establishment of the Republic. Sinn Féin has functioned as Ireland's main "populist" party, although with a left-leaning ideology. Sinn Féin re-entered the Irish political scene in the early 1980s under the leadership of Gerry Adams. The party was revived during the Troubles by members of the Provisional IRA who aimed to shift the focus of Irish republicanism towards electoral politics. Sinn Féin retained its republican ideology and advocated for Irish unity and the withdrawal of Britain from Northern Ireland. Adams and other Sinn Féin politicians placed blame onto Britain for Ireland's woes, both in the north and south. Sinn Féin brought a populist flair to Irish electoral politics as a result of their "us versus them" rhetoric.

After the 2008 crash and subsequent 2010 bank bailout, right-wing euroscepticism did not take hold in Ireland as it did in the UK. Although Sinn Fein held a "euro-critical" stance with regards to the European Union, they never advocated fervently for Ireland's secession from the EU or other similar supranational organizations. Rather, Sinn Féin preferred to advocate for their

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[55]O'Malley, Eoin and Fitzgibbon, John, "Everywhere and Nowhere: Populism and the Puzzling Non-Reaction to Ireland's Crises" . European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession edited by Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis S. Pappas. ECPR Press. September 2014.

preferred left-wing policies as participants in the EU Parliament. The party's main issue with the EU is that its requirements of member states could interfere with Irish neutrality. In other words, the party is apprehensive about the nature of EU membership duties potentially forcing Ireland to take sides in a conflict in contrast to their national interests. Sinn Féin's euro-criticism differs from that of right wing populist parties in that the party's main issues with the EU are not directed towards targeted minority groups within Ireland[56]. Rather, Sinn Féin placed the blame on European "banking and government elites" for the implementation of unpopular austerity measures such as water charges and other tax increases. This rhetoric differs from the anti-immigrant latent euro-skepticism of UKIP; placing blame on immigrants for Ireland's economic shortcomings would never have appealed to a broad base of voters due to the country's high immigrant tolerance level.[57] Sinn Fein's history of left wing politics differs from UKIP and other right wing European populist parties although the party uses familiar nationalistic, anti-elite rhetoric.

Additionally, Ireland's legislative structure and party system tends to complicate the emergence of small parties. Irish political parties receive funding based on previous electoral success. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael receive public funding based on seat shares and number of votes as well as a highly regulated share of individual and corporate campaign donations. This system was specifically designed to promote stability and minimize the influence of smaller, radical parties on policy making. Since Ireland places an emphasis on continuity and relatively moderate politics, a radical populist party, from either the right or left, would find it difficult to break into the mainstream political sphere. Within the dominant party system, the Dail's main parties

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[56]Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

adhere strictly to the whip system. Members of the Irish legislature are punished severely for refusing to vote along the party line, so much so that the whip system has drawn mass criticism from its members, other politicians and Irish citizens[58]. Because Irish politicians are highly incentivized to vote with their respective party, short term populist movements that emerged in response to specific issues are not likely to actually affect policy making due to the pro-establishment bias in the Irish legislature.

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[58] Gallagher, Michael. 2010. 'The Oireachtas: President and Parliament' in John Coakley and Michael Gallagher (eds.) Politics in the Republic of Ireland 5th ed. London: Routledge.

Brexit

In the months following the Brexit referendum, the debate over Northern Ireland's status within the United Kingdom was re-invigorated. There was little serious discussion regarding Northern Ireland in the British mainstream media which contributed to the overall feeling that the nation was hardly considered, if at all, during the referendum campaign. In reality, there was lengthy consideration of the status of the still ongoing peace process in both the North and the Republic. Entities that were present both during and after the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement were terrified that a Leave vote could throw off the delicate balance the Agreement had maintained. While MPs in London and British citizens were looking beyond their borders while considering the outcome of the referendum, Ireland and a large group within the North were only able to consider Brexit in terms of its consequences for the island as a whole. There was a clear discrepancy between the concerns of London, Northern Irish and Irish political elites regarding what Brexit could mean for the future of the British Isles.

The Leave vote caused a cascade of political, social, and most importantly constitutional issues for Stormont. The Agreement set up a system of parallel consent, an integral tenant of its consociational system. The government functions on the basis of both majority and cross-community consent. Unionists are assured by the principle of majoritarian consent that as long as they maintain a demographic majority in Northern Ireland, their place in the Union is secure. In turn, nationalists are assured by the cross-community consent principle because it requires that all laws passed by Stormont must have some form of approval by both

communities, thus their minority status is protected[59]. For both communities, the constitutional status of Northern Ireland is guaranteed by parallel consent, a safeguard that was thrown to the wayside by the Brexit vote. While 56% of Northern Irish voters chose to remain, the Brexit vote did not require the consent of the Stormont devolved parliament. With multiple forms of consent being the guiding hand behind the region's politics for decades, the Brexit vote was seen as a betrayal of the principles that maintained Northern Ireland's delicate balance or power[60]. Nationalists in the North, most of whom voted Remain, were shocked by the Leave vote because they viewed it as potentially resulting in a hard border between the North and the Republic. Nationalists and pro-Rremain Unionists (most of which were from the UUP) considered the island's soft border as a preventative measure against backsliding into the violence of the Troubles.

Northern Irish Political Parties During the Brexit Campaign

Northern Ireland's constitutional status has remained the principal ideologically divided issue for its main parties ever since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Each of Stormont's parties can be placed somewhere along the nationalist-unionist binary and are in fact required to self-designate as either nationalist, unionist, or other. Because of this sharp partisan divide on the constitutional question, Northern Irish parties tend to split on other related and unrelated issues along the same nationalist/unionist divide. This is true for each party's view on Europe and the EU as an institution. Northern Irish voters mimic this pattern of siding with their preferred

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[59] As of the May 2022 assembly election, Sinn Fein gained a majority for the first time in the government's history, overtaking the DUP.

[60] Mitchell, David. "Political Parties in Northern Ireland and the Post-Brexit Constitutional Debate", ed. Oran Doyle, Aileen McHarg, Jo Murkens, *The Brexit Challenge for Ireland and the United Kingdom: Constitutions under Pressure*, Cambridge, *Cambridge University Press*, 2021, 86 - 107.

nationalist or unionist party on various other issues, including EU membership[61]. Although

Northern Ireland was not considered thoroughly by Conservatives in Westminster during the

Brexit campaign, there was ample debate in Stormont regarding what a Leave vote could mean

for the future of the North's constitutional status.

The parties that expressed the most concern for a potential Leave vote were the Social

Democratic Labour Party and Sinn Fein. The SDLP is the North's most historically pro-european

party. During the Good Friday negotiations, the SDLP under the leadership of John Hume

expressed support for the Agreement as a pathway to further European integration and

dissolution of hard borders. During negotiations, the SDLP saw the consent principles, expulsion

of the hard north-south border, and provision for a future unity referendum as a sign that

Northern Ireland was joining the rest of Europe as a modern, progressive, democratic state. After

1998, the SDLP remained committed to upholding the principles of the Agreement as a result of

their pro-europe sensibility. Sinn Fein can be described as more nationalist and left-leaning than

the SDLP with a historically "euro-critical" stance[62]. However, Sinn Fien's view on Europe has

warmed as a result of their commitment to political pragmatism. The party has grown in

popularity over the past several decades as it has aimed to distance itself from its historical roots

in the Irish Republican Army[63]. Sinn Fein ultimately supported Remain as a result of the party's

commitment to maintaining a soft border between the north and the south and its "euro-critical",

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[61] Hayes, B. C. and McAllister, I. (1996): 'British and Irish Public Opinion Towards the Northern Ireland Problem', Irish Political Studies, 11, pp. 61-82.

[62] Mitchell, David. "Political Parties in Northern Ireland and the Post-Brexit Constitutional Debate", ed. Oran Doyle, Aileen McHarg, Jo Murkens, The Brexit Challenge for Ireland and the United Kingdom: Constitutions under Pressure, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 86 - 107.

[63] Sinn Fien won a majority of seats in the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections. This is the first time a nationalist party has ever held a majority of seats in a Northern Ireland executive since its founding. Source: Sproule, Luke. "NI Election Results 2022: What Does Sinn Féin's Vote Success Mean?" BBC News, BBC, 12 May 2022.

not "euro-skeptical" stance. After the referendum, both parties advocated for preserved access to the Single Market and EU Customs Union through a "special status" designation for Northern Ireland. Both parties also supported a border poll concerning the future of Irish unification as a result of the referendum vote.

The Alliance Party, Northern Ireland's fifth largest party, had always maintained an optimistic, pro-europe stance, similar to that of the SDLP. Alliance's position as an unaligned (neither unionist or nationalist) party in Stormont has historically allowed it to take stances on certain issues outside of the nationalist-unionist binary. Alliance's attitude of reconciliation and non-partisanship in regards to the constitutional question backs up its faith in the European Union as an institution. The party's view was that after the Agreement, Northern Irish voters would be able to share a common European identity provided to them by membership of the EU as opposed to the traditional nationalist-unionist identity framework[64]. Shared European identity would provide a bridge between the two deeply divided communities by creating a system of shared principles. Due to the Alliance party's commitment to the European project, it viewed the potential of a Leave vote as an existential threat to the peace afforded to the region by the Agreement.

There was disagreement amongst Northern Ireland's unionist parties regarding Brexit. The UUP supported Remain while the DUP was the only mainstream Leave party. The DUP's position was that the EU posed a threat to British sovereignty over Northern Ireland and overall British identity in the region. The DUP supported a hard Brexit and preservation of the link between Northern Ireland and the UK during the subsequent negotiations. The UUP supported Remain

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[64] Mitchell, David. "Political Parties in Northern Ireland and the Post-Brexit Constitutional Debate", ed. Oran Doyle, Aileen McHarg, Jo Murkens, The Brexit Challenge for Ireland and the United Kingdom: Constitutions under Pressure, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 86 - 107.

due to its historical ambivalence on Europe and desire to continue receiving EU funding for

businesses and the peace process. The party maintained their strategy of pragmatism throughout

the negotiation period as they sought to minimize the effects of the withdrawal on Northern

Ireland's economy and prevent the formation of a hard border[65].

Renewable Heat Initiative Scandal of 2016

The Renewable Heat Initiative scandal (RHI)[66], also commonly known as the Cash for Ash

Scandal, is one of the largest political disasters to rock Stormont since its founding in 1998. The

scheme began in 2011 when the Northern Ireland Executive adopted a plan to increase renewable

energy usage to 4% by 2015 and increase to 10% by 2020. The region was to implement this

goal by providing long-term financial incentives to businesses that switched out their traditional

heating systems for more renewable sources of energy, mainly wood pellet burning furnaces. The

initiative was spearheaded by Stormont's Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

(DETI), then under the leadership of the DUP's Arlene Foster. The program would compensate

businesses for using renewable fuel, however the costs of burning wood pellets were much less

than the allotted subsidy. Businesses were making money from burning wood fuel by receiving

reimbursements from the DETI. Additionally, there was no funding cap placed on the

Department for the subsidies, so businesses were allowed to exploit the system by burning as

much wood fuel as they could to continue profiting[67].

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[65] Ibid.

[66]"Need-to-Know Guide: Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Scheme." BBC News, BBC, 7 Nov. 2017.

[67]"Cash-for-Ash Fiasco: Northern Ireland's Enron on Craggy Island." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 28 Sept. 2018.

The scheme was exposed by a whistleblower in January 2016 who reported several instances of fraudulent receipt of funds to Arlene Foster, then First Minister. The whistleblower made claims of farms and factories running renewable heaters around the clock in order to earn a projected 1.5 million pounds in reimbursements over a long term period. The RHI was shut down in February of 2016 and an investigation into fraud claims followed in January of 2017. Due to lack of cost controls, the Northern Ireland Executive committed 490 million pounds to the scheme. It is estimated that applicants are set to be owed up to 1 billion pounds in reimbursements promised in 20-year contracts issued by the Department. There were protests throughout Northern Ireland and calls for Foster to resign as First Minister immediately following the publication of the scandal[68].

On December 19, 2016, the Northern Ireland Assembly was recalled from recess as a result of the scandal. Foster was to give an address to the legislature regarding the scandal, however several members of the Assembly were concerned that she did not receive proper permission from Martin McGuinness, her Deputy First Minister. Without receipt of proper permission from McGuinness to give the address, Foster would be in violation of the principles of power-sharing outlined by the Agreement, seeing as the two equal executive positions are mutually interdependent. At the beginning of her speech, all parties except her DUP walked out of Stormont in protest. Foster survived the following vote of no confidence proposed by the SDLP, UUP, Alliance, People Before Profit, Traditional Unionist Voice and Green parties. The vote of no confidence failed to reach the required qualified cross-community majority required to remove a Minister from office. 39 members voted to exclude her from office while 36 voted against exclusion (out of 79 voting members). 100% of Nationalists and 29% of unionists voted

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[68] "Q&A: What is the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme?". BBC News. 13 December 2016.

for exclusion. Martin McGuinness, in a move to force Foster out of office, resigned as Deputy

First Minister[69]. His resignation forced Foster to also vacate her position as per Stormont rules

and the Executive was fully vacated on January 9, 2017. The Assembly was subsequently

dissolved on January 26 after Sinn Fein refused to nominate a Deputy First Minister to serve

alongside Foster, who was re-nominated by the DUP. A snap election was held on March 2 in

order to elect new MP's. The 2017 snap election delivered a considerable blow to Unionist

representation in the Assembly. For the first time in the region's history, Unionists lost their

majority in Stormont[70].

The scandal significantly decreased the electorates' confidence in Stormont's ability to function

efficiently, more specifically their ability to uphold the principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

Additionally, the Assembly was suspended from 2017-2020, the four most action packed years in

terms of Brexit negotiations in Westminster. Sinn Féin refused to re-enter into the executive with

the DUP as a result of Foster's mishandling of the scandal, unless the DUP agreed to provide

legislation for an Irish language protection act[71][72]. Under Theresa May's Conservative/DUP

coalition government formed in June of 2017, the DUP held a considerable amount of power

with regards to May's Brexit strategy, however the absence of the executive in Northern Ireland

complicated the issue.

Theresa May's 2017 Snap Election

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[69] McGuinness died of a rare terminal illness three months after his resignation on March 21.
[70] "Northern Ireland Assembly Election, 2 March 2017". Archived from the original on 1 February 2017.
[71] McCormack, Jayne. "Stormont: What Is It and Why Did Power-Sharing Collapse in Northern Ireland?" BBC News, BBC, 10 Jan. 2020.
[72] The executive was eventually restored in early 2020 after the two parties brokered a deal.

Theresa May succeeded David Camerion as prime minister after his resignation in July of 2016

as a result of the Leave vote. May inherited the responsibility of her party to deliver on Brexit,

triggering Article 50 of the Treaty of European Union (the provision of EU law allowing for any

member state to formally begin its withdrawal process) in March of 2017[73]. The following June,

May issued a snap general election in hopes of bolstering the Conservative majority in

Parliament. The next general election was not due until May of 2020, however May called for

the snap election in order to augment her party's 17 seat single-party majority over Labour in

order to strengthen her power come time for Brexit negotiations[74]. Although early projections

saw a victory for Tories in terms of increasing their existing majority, the party ended up with a

net loss of 13 seats while Labour exited with a 30 seat net gain. The DUP won 10 seats in

Stormont, and Sinn Féin 7[75], while the SDLP and UUP both lost seats. The election followed

after the March 2 election in the Northern Ireland Assembly[76]. Since the Tories only won 42% of

the vote and Labour won only 40%, the election resulted in a hung parliament with no party

gaining a majority. May was then forced to form a coalition government with the DUP under

Foster in order to create a minority government[77]. The Conservatives became reliant on the DUP

to push Brexit policy in the House of Commons. A major component of the confidence and

supply deal brokered between the two parties was Tory assurance of continued support for

Unionism in Northern Ireland and maintenance of the consent principle established by the Good

Friday Agreement. The deal also included £1 billion of additional funding for the region in order

to express Tory support for the continued peace process.

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[73] Tonge, J, 'Supplying Confidence or Trouble? The Deal between the Democratic Unionist Party and the Conservative Party (2017) *The Political Quarterly,* 88, 412-16.
[74] "Theresa May on calling an early election: full statement". New Statesman. 18 April 2017.
[75] Sinn Féin continues its policy of abstention from their allotted seats in Westminster.
[76] "General Election 2017: full results and analysis". UK Parliament (second ed.). 29 January 2019.
[77] "Confidence and Supply Agreement between the Conservative Party and the DUP" (PDF). assets.publishing.service.gov.uk.

May's call for the snap election and subsequent loss of her majority in Westminster was a major political blunder for the Tories. May was disappointed by her party's showing in the polls considering major news outlets in the United Kingdom predicted a sweeping victory for the Conservatives. Although May called the election in order to strengthen her Brexit negotiating position in the House of Commons, Brexit kept a low profile during the campaign while candidates focused largely on other domestic issues. However, according to a BBC poll, more than one third of UK voters identified Brexit as the single most important issue facing the country at the time of the election[78]. The study also found that over half of UKIP voters voted Conservative, and 18% even voted Labour in 2017. Labour won over the majority of Remain voters including those who had previously supported Lib Dems and Greens. Remain voters were likely attracted to Labour because of their support for a Brexit plan than included the UK remaining within the single market. Remain voters had accepted the imminence of Brexit and rather had to choose their preferred exit plan. The Conservatives attracted those who favored a hard Brexit while Labour attracted those who favored a soft Brexit.

Two years of squabbling over Brexit followed in Westminster as May was evidently unable to deliver on Brexit in her term as Prime Minister. The House of Commons rejected three separate Brexit proposals and May's coalition struggled to compromise with Labour regarding the soft/hard Brexit divide, most notably the Chequers Plan proposed in July of 2018. The plan provided for the retention of the UK's position within the EU single market and prevented the need for a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It was rejected by the EU the following September over concerns that it would violate the integrity of the single

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[78]"General Election 2017: Brexit Dominated Voters' Thoughts." BBC News, BBC, 1 Aug. 2017.

market.[79] Furthermore, the DUP expected Tories to deliver on their promise to safeguard their territorial interests in Northern Ireland in exchange for their continued solution support in the House of Commons. The EU and UK governments agreed that a special qualification should be made in the final Brexit withdrawal agreement regarding the north-south Irish border dispute. The special provision preventing additional customs controls for north-south trade became known as the "Irish backstop.' The backstop was meant to keep Northern Ireland somewhat within the EU single market and the rest of the UK within some EU customs regulations until an internal east-west agreement could be negotiated between Northern Ireland, Ireland and the UK[80]. The DUP vetoed the backstop plan in parliament in January of 2019 after it had been approved by May on the grounds that the backstop did not contain a specified end date. The backstop plan was eventually reworked into the official Northern Ireland Protocol as a segment of the Brexit withdrawal treaty between the UK and EU.

May officially resigned on July 24, 2019 and was succeeded by Boris Johnson. Johnson had previously served as Foreign Secretary before resigning from that position in protest of the Chequers Plan. The death of the Chequers Plan, the Irish backstop ensuring a soft north-south border and finally May's premiership signaled the end of the possibility of a soft Brexit.

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[79] "May to set out Brexit wishes; EU says ideas so far are 'pure illusion'". Reuters. 25 February 2018.
[80]Brexit draft agreement: What has been agreed on Northern Ireland to avoid a hard border – Belfast Telegraph, 14 November 2018.

<u>Discussion and Analysis</u>

Hard Brexit, Hard Reconciliation

Although the final Brexit withdrawal agreement (officially the Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community) took force on January 31, 2020 which included the Northern Ireland Protocol, Brexit's consequences regarding constitutional question in Northern Ireland is far from resolved. After the referendum, the question of maintenance of peace in Northern Ireland and the Republic became a central factor in withdrawal negotiations largely in part because of the Tory reliance on the DUP in Westminster but also the Irish government's insistence on attention to the issue. Brexit reinforced the North's position as economically, socially and politically stuck between two sovereign nations with opposite outwardly diplomatic strategies. Ireland, having relied on the EU and its constituent bodies throughout the period of financial crisis, maintained its pro-EU strategy. On the other hand, populist forces rising in the UK as a result of the financial crisis succeeded in turning British voters inward, eventually resulting in a Leave vote that came as a shock to London, Dublin and Belfast. In the middle, Northern Ireland suffered through its own political crises such as the Renewable Heat Initiative scandal and the three year suspension of the executive form 2017-2020.

The Good Friday Agreement was underpinned both by EU economic assistance for cross-border cooperation and maintenance of the peace process by means of the single market, but also as a separate, mediary sense of identity for those who wished not to align themselves across the ethno-national divide. The nearly invisible border prevented backsliding into violence and has

been integral in the maintenance of cross-border cooperation for decades. Brexit re-opened the

border question on the island because if the UK were to leave the EU single market, there would

necessarily have to be a hard border with customs checks between Northern Ireland and the

Republic. The UK and Ireland's official policy during Brexit negotiations was to avoid a hard

north-south border at all costs in order to uphold the principles of the Agreement. The two paths

of resolution for Northern Ireland to remain in the single market to prevent a hard border (which

would in turn necessitate customs checks for goods and peoples moving back and forth between

Northern Ireland and the UK, an Irish sea border), or for the North to leave the single market,

resulting in a hard north-south border. The majority position within Westminster was to maintain

the soft north-south border, however DUP unionists viewed potential east-west customs

regulations as a result of the region remaining in the single market as a weakening of their

position within the Union. The Northern Ireland Protocol as adopted with the 2020 Brexit

Withdrawal Agreement formally removes the North from the single market, however EU free

movement of goods and EU Customs Union rules still apply, thus the soft border assured by the

Agreement is protected[81]. The Protocol also includes a consent mechanism whereas Northern

Ireland's compliance with the protocol ought to be voted on by the Assembly after four years of

its implementation. Consent is ruled by a simple majority of MLAs in Stormont[82]. The consent

principle of the Protocol further mimics the consent principle set up by the Good Friday

Agreement. In March of 2021, a series of riots across unionist communities broke out in

response to the inclusion of the Protocol. Unionists were reacting to the imposition of an Irish

sea border[83].

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[81] "Northern Ireland protocol: consent mechanism". Institute For Government. 19 December 2019.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Blackall, Molly (3 April 2021). "Northern Ireland's first minister joins calls for calm after Belfast riots". The Guardian.

The Easy Way Out?

The future for the island in terms of Brexit is uncertain. Continuing political disagreements in Stormont and Westminster over the Northern Ireland Protocol indicate that the complications of Brexit are here to stay. It became clear that the consociational political institutions set up by the Agreement did little in and of themselves to alleviate cross-community tension seeing as both communities were still starkly divided on the Brexit question. Successive failures in executive leadership in Stormont and inability to compromise on key issues decreases the Northern Ireland's electorates' confidence in their political institutions. If Northern Ireland's political institutions are the reasons Brexit is causing a resurgence of 1990s-era tensions, then reforming said institutions should provide a clear path forward. However, like all things in the region, reform is not simple. After the Brexit referendum, Sinn Féin representatives immediately began calling for a border poll. A border poll would invoke the provision of the Good Friday Agreement which provides for the potential re-unification of Northern Ireland and Ireland if the majority in both jurisdictions so wishes. Nationalists view reunification as a solution to the Brexit question because it would dissolve the north-south border completely. If the partition of Ireland was decided by referendum over a century ago, then re-unification should be decided by referendum as well. A border poll is obviously not the preferred solution for unionists seeing as their political position rests on Northern Ireland's existence as a constituent nation of the United Kingdom. Although the ethno-national, nationalist/unionist divide still dominates Northern Irish politics, there is recent evidence of growing middle ground between the two communities. As time progresses away from the days of the Troubles, Northern Irish have become less attached to

their perceived nationalist or unionist identity. Decreases in the salience of religious belief has also contributed to the growing middle ground as more people chose not to align with Catholicism, Protestantism or any religion whatsoever. This modest but growing middle ground presents a challenge for the paradigm of bipolar identity politics set up by the Agreement.[84]

A referendum on Irish unity has become increasingly likely since 2015 as a result of both Brexit and demographic changes in the North. Cultural Catholics overtook cultural Protestants for the first time ever in 2021[85]. As Northern Irish Catholics tend to vote for its nationalist parties, the prospect of reunification as a result of the referendum is a feasible outcome. A reunification referendum would require majority consent in both the North and the Republic. Public opinion research has begun in order to gather how Northern Irish feel about potential reunification with the Republic and precisely what form a united Ireland would take. A 2020 study gathered a sample of Northern Irish voters in order to debate the merits of two proposed models of a united Ireland[86]. A one day assembly was conducted in Belfast using a cross-sectional sample of the public. The first united Ireland model presented was a fully integrated Ireland, in which Northern Ireland ceases to exist and is absorbed into Ireland as a party of its whole polity. The second model is a devolved Northern Ireland model in which Northern Ireland continues to exist with most of the institutions provided by the Good Friday Agreement remaining, while Dublin gains sovereign authority over the whole island. Results from the study indicated that while most participants initially favored the devolved model, after engaging deliberations throughout the day, support for this model declined and began to match support for the fully integrated model.

[84] Coakley, J. (2021): 'Is a Middle Force Emerging in Northern Ireland?', Irish Political Studies, 36(1), pp. 29-51.
[85]"2021 Census." Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.
[86] Garry, J., O'Leary, B., Coakley, J., Pow, J., and Whitten, L. (2020): 'Public Attitudes to Different Possible Models of a United Ireland: Evidence from a Citizens' Assembly in Northern Ireland', Irish Political Studies, 35(3), pp. 422-450.

While a full discussion of all potential merits/pitfalls and models for a united Ireland are outside the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning that interest in a referendum has increased in recent years with demographic changes and that preliminary research on the subject has begun in the North.

However, it is not a given that the Irish and Northern Irish public would certainly vote to reunify if a referendum were to be held by 2030. In a 2018 study conducted through an attitude survey paired with a deliberative forum of Northern Irish citizens, strong opposition was found to the idea of holding a referendum in the short term (short term meaning immediately after the UK's full withdrawal from the EU). Participants feared that a referendum would destabilize the peace process more than Brexit already has since 2016[87]. The study also revealed that 68% of Catholic participants support a united Ireland as opposed to 28% of Protestants, providing further evidence of the existing ethno-national divide. The results from the study were highly contingent on the results of Brexit negotiations considering most participants favored a soft exit with no new north-south border checks. Participants were more likely to support the UK remaining within the Union if the UK were to accept a soft Brexit. Public opinion will likely have changed as a result of Johnson's hard Brexit deal and squabbles over the Northern Ireland Protocol although large public opinion surveys have yet to be published reflecting said change.

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[87] "I don't think people could wrap their heads round that at the minute,there's enough going on. We'll cross one bridge at a time."
- Male, 60+, C2DE, Protestant, Leave
"I would say if a referendum is mentioned, even just the word, you'd have people who would go, excuse the Belfast language, but they would go buck mad ... there'd be riots. I don't think we would actually get as far as voting, people would go berserk before that."
- Female, 60+, ABC1, Catholic, Remain (Garry et al 2018)

Conclusion

The path to resolution of the issues posed by Brexit is anything but clear. The fragile peace brokered by the Good Friday Agreement over two decades ago was thrown into flux while politicians and citizens alike still struggle to make sense of their national identity. The project of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland is far from over as ethno-national cleavages were re-emphasised and exacerbated by the post Brexit debate. However, evidence of a growing middle ground between non-sectarian aligned Northern Irish presents new debates in and of itself. As more citizens choose not to identify as either nationalist or unionist, their position within their region's bipolar political system becomes ambiguous. Yet national perceived identity remains at the center of Northern Irish politics and likely will not dissolve completely as a result of this growing middle force.

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